The FATAL CART AND OTHER STORIES

By

C. Rajagopalachari

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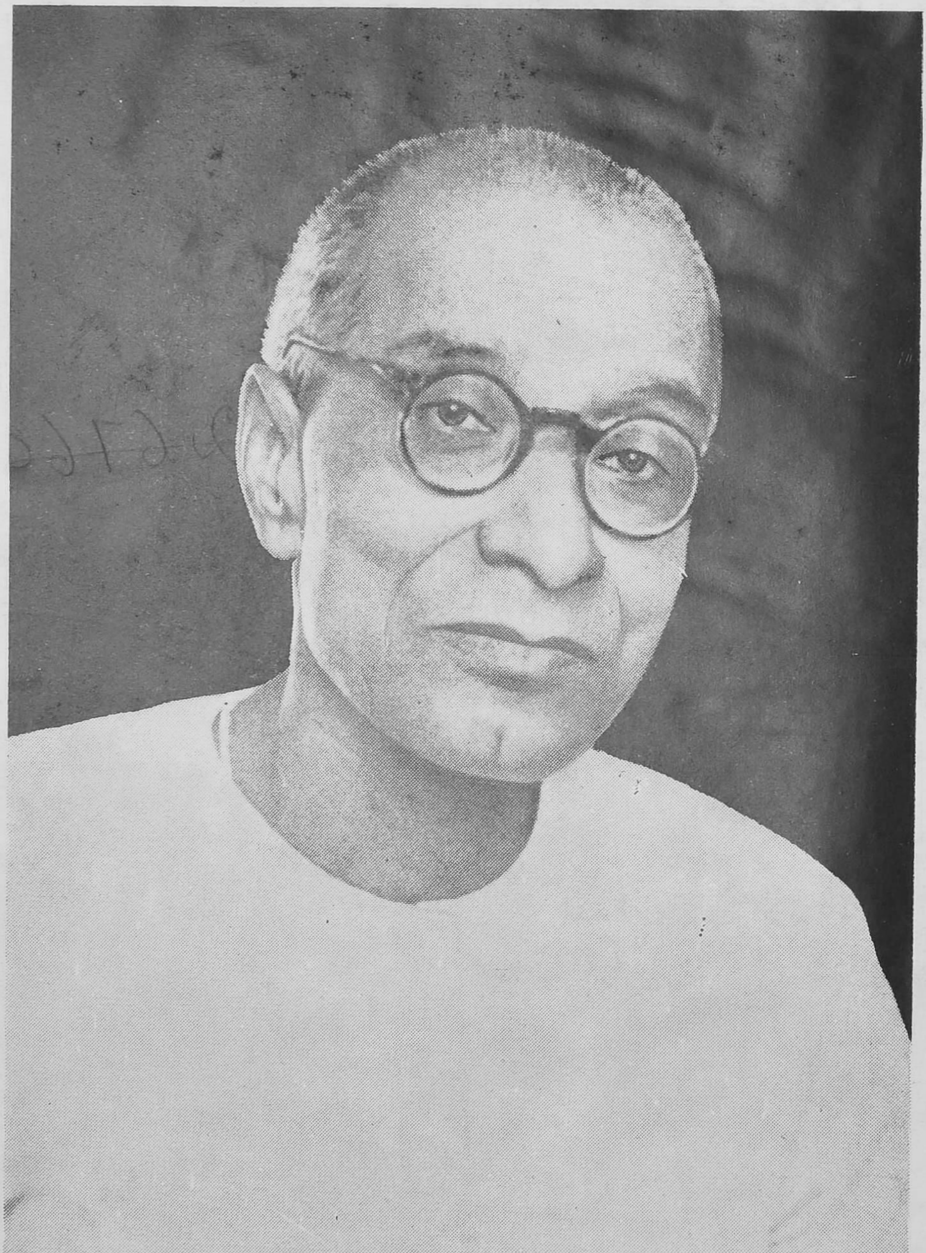

MR C. RAJAGOPALACHARI

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THE HINDUSTAN TIMES,
NEW DELHI.

Printed and Published by Devi Prasad Sharma
at the Hindustan Times Press, New Delhi.

K. R. RAGHUNATHA ROW,
NO. 1, KRISHNA ROW AGRAHARAM,

AUTHOR'S NOTE

These stories were written in Tamil and appeared in Tamil journals. They have been done into English by my son, Dr C. R. Ramaswami. It is not easy to translate from one language into another anything that deals with men and women and their joys and sorrows. I tender my grateful thanks to Mr P. J. Chester who went through the proofs and improved the language most painstakingly.

The stories were written at various times between 1925 and now. They are not arranged here in chronological order.

Madras,

December 12, 1945. C. R.

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ARDHANARI

Ardhanari was a Harijan boy from the village of Kokkalai in Salem district. He went to Delhi with Sri Malkani, Secretary of the Society for the Service of the Untouchables. When Sri Malkani was in South India, he was very pleased with this boy, whom he met at Salem, and immediately decided to take him to Delhi with him. There he put him in a school and looked after him. He spoke to a well-known firm of traders in Delhi and got him a job in their office on sixty rupees a month. As Ardhanari was honest, diligent and had personality, he got on well. He was getting Rs. 150 per month before he was twenty-four, and when, some time later, a place in a big mill belonging to the same firm fell vacant in Bangalore, they sent Ardhanari there on a salary of Rs. 200 a month.

He spent two happy years in Bangalore. His immediate senior, Govinda Rao, had training in Manchester for two years. He and Ardhanari were of about the same age, and as he liked Ardhanari's disposition and manners, they became close friends.

Govinda Rao had a sister called Pankaja. Brother and sister loved each other very much. Their parents had died when the girl was just ten years old, and she was now twenty and unmarried. She and Ardhanari often met as she accompanied her brother when he visited Ardhanari and when the latter came to see her brother. When Govinda Rao found that his sister and Ardhanari seemed to like each other, he was glad. He often asked himself: "Why should not these two marry and settle down here?"

One day Govinda Rao asked his sister, "Pankaja, have you ever thought about your marriage?" "I have no strong feelings on the matter," she replied. "Then, what about marrying our Ardhanari?" Pankaja showed no objection to being thus questioned, but she evaded the question by talking about something

else. Some weeks later, the same matter was broached again, incidentally.

"Why Gopu, are you tired of me already? Am I a burden to you?" she said at first and laughed. Then she began to cry. Girls, specially those who have lost their mothers, are very sensitive.

"Stupid, don't talk of being a burden or of my getting tired of you. Just tell me if you care for the idea of marriage. If you say no, that will please me, because then I can always have you with me," he said and wiped her eyes. Then he said again, "Mother is dead. Who else is there but me to enquire and learn from you what you feel about it?"

"If it comes about, I shall go through it. But what is the point in discussing it now?" asked Pankaja.

"You two seem to like each other. And as we have left off caring about caste or family, why should you not marry him?" he asked.

"What indeed have we to do with caste? But we do not yet know what he feels about it," said Pankaja.

"Don't worry about that. He must think himself very lucky if he gets someone like you for his wife," said Govinda Rao. He was sure there was no one to compare with his sister in the whole world.

When Ardhanari was told about this, his joy knew no bounds. But a minute later his face fell. "But how can that be, Govinda Rao?" he said.

"Why? What is the trouble?" asked Govinda Rao.

"What is my caste and what is yours?" said Ardhanari.

"Oh! The question of caste! Nonsense!" Govinda Rao exclaimed and laughed. "What is a Brahmin? What is a non-Brahmin? We stopped thinking about such things long ago. If you like each other and finally decide to marry, we need not worry about caste."

"I belong to the Coimbatore district. I am a Saiva Mudaliar.' That was what Ardhanari had told them. A Saiva Mudaliar is a vegetarian high caste non-Brahmin. Having said this on some occasion out of snobbish fear, he was unable to withdraw it afterwards. He was ashamed to own the truth about his caste. At Delhi a few knew but in Bangalore nobody knew his antecedents.

"What is Pankaja's wish?" asked Ardhanari.

"Pankaja seems to like you. Her replies to my questions show that she is willing."

"Is it not proper that I should ask her and find out for myself?" said Ardhanari.

"Yes," said Govinda Rao.

Thus the affair was put off. He resolved that he would tell Pankaja the truth, whatever might happen. But later his resolution failed.

"Why should I go out of my way to tell her this? If I do, Govinda Rao and Pankaja will both hate me. They say that they do not mind caste distinctions. But yet if they come to know that I am a pariah, they will never give their consent. Besides, I shall be considered a liar," he thought within himself.

Next day he thought the matter over again and went to Govinda Rao's house intending to disclose the truth. But, again, on the way he debated within himself, "When we two love each other, what reason is there to consider this caste question? Why should we give any quarter to this injustice? Who created caste? Is it not all a lie? Why should I make so much of it and speak to her about it? Why should I speak to her about it and spoil the whole business? They have told me distinctly that they do not care about caste. Why then should I refer to it at all?" He made up his mind to suppress the truth.

"Pankaja, do you really like me? Shall we get married and live together?" he asked.

"But do you want to?" said Pankaja.

Ardhanari's father Muniappan, his brother Ranga and mother Kuppayee all lived in the cheri or pariah quarters of the village Kokkolai. Both while at Delhi and at Bangalore, Ardhanari used to send them twenty rupees regularly every month. It was a princely allowance to them, and they lived on it very happily. They did not know what their son was earning, but twenty rupees a month seemed a great fortune to them. Unfortunately, Muniappan had the drink habit. When he began to get money regularly every month, his drinking became worse. Ranga did not like this, but could not prevent it. He was a teacher in a village school and was unmarried. When his mother pressed him to find a wife, he would say, "Not now, wait for some time more," and always put off the matter.

Ardhanari, after his transfer to Bangalore, used to visit his people twice a year. When he found his father addicted to drink, he felt ashamed beyond measure. He could not bear the dirt and untidiness of the house. He would stay there for only a day or two and then return as soon as possible.

"We will go with you, Ardhanari," his father would say whenever Ardhanari got ready to return to Bangalore.

"No indeed. If they see you with me, they will dismiss me," Ardhanari would reply.

"Yes, father, we people should not go there," Ranga would say.

Because he sent them money regularly, they would not argue much more about it. Thus it went on for some time.

Ardhanari thought it would be best for him to go somewhere far in the north again, once he was married.

"Though they are very kind to me, if they know that I am a pariah, things would certainly go wrong. Even supposing they do not mind, yet when they see the life and habits of my father and my people, Pankaja would certainly be disgusted. She would not even look at me afterwards." Ardhanari would talk to himself in this strain again and again, and further strengthen

his resolve to hide the truth. He decided to marry as soon as possible and go away to some place in the north. He wrote letters to the directors of the company he served and asked to be transferred to some other mill in North India.

One day Pankaja quite unexpectedly said, "Ardhanari, I want very much to see your mother. We have both decided that you should take leave for a week and we should all three go and visit Coimbatore, Ootacamund and other places. What do you say?"

Govinda Rao also said, "There is not much work in the office now. The first week of next month will suit us all very well."

Ardhanari's heart beat fast. "Oh yes, we can do that. But I have a letter today that there is a severe epidemic of cholera in our village," he said.

Pankaja was all anxiety on hearing this, "Cholera! Have you asked your people to move elsewhere? Why not ask them to come over here?" she said.

"I was just thinking of doing so," said Ardhanari.

After three days Ardhanari got a letter from Ranga.

"Blessings to small brother Ardhanari.

"There is severe cholera here. There have been many deaths. We are afraid. Father continues as before. He does not listen to our advice. The money that you sent this month is all spent. If you can send us thirty rupees we think of locking up the house and going to Salem to stay there still this fear of cholera is over.

Yours affectionately,

Ranga."

Ardhanari was surprised and shocked. "What is the meaning of this? What I said in deceit has turned out true. God is trying me, perhaps," said he to himself and was undecided as to what he should do. He then thought he would send the money next day.

Ardhanari got no sleep that night.

Bad thoughts, shameful thoughts kept stirring in his mind.

Whenever he thought of his father, he felt disgust. The wish often arose in his mind that his father would die of cholera and relieve him of all this misery. Next moment, he would censure himself for this thought. He tossed restlessly on his bed all night and in the morning he took a cold bath. The postman brought letters. As he had expected, there was another letter from his village. With trembling hands, he opened it and read:

"Father is suffering from cholera. We are greatly afraid. Mariayee must save us! We have not a pie with us.—Ranga."

When he read the letter Ardhanari's face grew dark. He remained seated in his chair for quite a long time. He did not send any money that day.

Nor did he send any money the next day.

"How is cholera in your village?" asked Pankaja.

"Still very bad, I'm afraid," said Ardhanari.

"Is there enough sugar in the coffee?" asked Govinda Rao.

"Oh yes! It is very good," said Ardhanari.

When he returned home there was a letter waiting for him.

"Mother too has cholera symptoms. You have not sent us any money. We are helpless. Come at once—Ranga."

Ardhanari sent no money that day either. He had turned his heart into stone. "This disgraceful feature of my life will now disappear for ever. This release looks like God's kindness to me. There is no *Dharma* or justice higher than His will. Why should I try to circumvent it? If father and mother die, there will then be nothing left to prevent my marriage with Pankaja."

Suddenly, "Tut! tut! What a sinful thought, you wicked man," someone appeared to reprimand him. When he turned his head round he saw Pankaja standing behind him. He was alarmed that his secret was out. Then his mind grew clear again. No one had spoken. It was just an illusion of his mind.

"How did you come in without making any sound?" he asked.

Pankaja laughed, "I knocked at the door three times and

then entered. You are worried about something, so you did not hear me come," she said.

"I must go to my village. It appears the cholera is worse there now. My father and mother are there and I must make some arrangements for them," he said.

"Yes, that should have been done long ago. If you go there now, you must be very careful. You must neither eat nor drink while you are there," she said.

Ardhanari left for Salem the same night. But instead of going straight to Kokkalai, he delayed on the way, and only reached after four days. His mother was already dead and poor Ranga had followed her. Only his drunkard father had escaped and was alive and well.

"Please take me to Bangalore. What shall I do here after this?" he begged Ardhanari. Ardhanari would not hear of it. He was adamant. "I will send you enough money. You must remain here. Do not ask to come with me, for I cannot take you," he said. Father entreated son like a helpless child.

"I can't stay here," he sobbed. Ardhanari refused to be moved by this weeping. "How can I give up Pankaja?" he said to himself and would not listen to his father's lamentations. Next day he placed a ten-rupee note in his father's hand and left for Salem.

"Alas! What have I done! I have killed my mother and brother. Why did I do this? Is there another villain like me in this world? How can I forsake my father like this? What shall I tell Pankaja?"

Immersed in such thoughts, he could not sleep in the train. When he arrived at Bangalore, he walked, in a dazed manner, the whole way to his house. There he bolted the door and lay down. He did not send word to Govinda Rao or Pankaja about his return, nor did he go to office.

The same night he took his luggage and again went to the railway station and bought a ticket for Salem.

At Salem, he heard that an Adidravida (untouchable) had drowned himself in a well in Kokkalai. When he got to Kokkalai, he learned that the man was his own father.

Some one said that they were holding an inquest at the police station over Muniappan the drunkard. He did not go there but, unnoticed by any one, returned to Salem and took train there to Bangalore.

"Pankaja, you must try to forget me," said Ardhanari.

"I shall do that afterwards. Tell me the news from Salem," said Pankaja.

"They are all dead. They are dead because I did not do what I should have done. I have lost all interest in life now. I am going to resign my job and go to my village. Please forget me," he said.

She looked at him two or three times. Then she got alarmed and ran to tell her brother.

Ardhanari had fever. At first the doctor said it was typhoid, then he said it was brain-fever. He had to stay in bed for over a month. Govinda Rao and Pankaja remained at his bedside without rest till, after the fourth week, the fever came down.

"There is no more cause for anxiety," said the doctor. Very soon he was well enough to sit up in bed.

"I am a pariah, a sinner. I am really an untouchable, a liar. I renounce marriage. For God's sake, forget me," said Ardhanari.

Pankaja laughed. "What do I care what caste you are? Why should we part from each other?" she said, trying to soothe him.

Ardhanari did not agree. "You do not mind my caste, I know. But I am a murderer. I have killed my father and mother," he said and told them the whole tale.

When he was quite well, he resigned his job and returned to Kokkolai. He is now the 'Samiar' or ascetic who conducts the school in the Mariamman temple.

HUNCHBACK SUNDARI

"Why should we bother what happens to him? It is dangerous to get involved in such things. Listen to me; and don't do it."

"There is no danger at all, Kamu. He does not know our handwriting. What if he does find out? We shall have had some fun."

"All right. You write it yourself. My pen refuses to write."

"All right; give it to me, I will write it. What is the difficulty?"

This conversation took place in a room in the Veeresalingam hostel for girls. Kamala and Kamatchi were reading for their B.A. The two joined to write a mischievous anonymous letter as follows:

Greetings to our Gita-prasanga-Siromani Narasimha Sastri!

Sir,—We the young girls of the Veeresalingam hostel humbly submit to you the following petition.

We fully appreciate the spirit with which you gave up your big job and out of devotion to God became engaged in the religious work of explaining our scriptures to the general public. We had never heard anything to equal the wonderful lecture you gave in the Vasanta Hall last Sunday. Until now no one has explained either the Gita or the Upanishads so beautifully. But how is it that the truths you explain to others so ably are not useful in your own case?

Did you not explain in a most wonderful way in your lecture that our thoughts should be withdrawn from sensual objects, even as the tortoise withdraws itself into its shell, and that the five senses are like horses which should be kept well-bridled or else they would get out of control and lead us into danger? Why did you not follow your own precepts? You lectured there for two hours without even taking a glance at the girls assembled there. People who saw you

thought that you were a sanyasi without his yellow garb. But your behaviour for the last two days belies this. You are dangerously straying from the path of virtue and are about to fall into the pit of sin. You do not seem to have control over your eyes. Some of us even thought of talking to the principal about you.

But we thought it would not be right to bring you into disgrace and have therefore written this letter.

When your wife died, why did you not follow the usual practice and marry again? Please listen to us. Let there be no more Gita lectures on your part. Go home and marry. You are not very old. We think you are only about fifty. We have selected a girl for you. In the big house in the South Street in Vankipuram, a station next to Renigunta junction, lives one Govindarya. He has a daughter about twenty-two years old. If you agree we shall get the marriage settled. We want a sign. If you spread your silk-bordered sash on the rope in the terrace and hang your umbrella on it, we shall be able to see it from here. It will be a sign to us that you agree to our proposal. We shall do all that is necessary. We shall get the people in the girl's house to give their consent.

Do not disgrace yourself. Do not ruin your good name. Please do not stand on the terrace and indulge in idle gazing.

The Veeresalingam Hostel Students.

II

Mahadanapuram Narasimha Sastri, after serving as sub-judge for twelve years without giving any cause for complaint, acted also as judge for a year. His wife, after remaining childless for fifteen years, gave birth to a daughter in the sixteenth year of her marriage. He had arranged very carefully for medical help and nursing; but on the seventeenth day after child-birth, in spite of the doctor's care, the mother died of septic fever leaving a baby girl.

His elder sister, a widow, stayed with him and brought up

the child very lovingly. She repeatedly pressed her younger brother to marry again, but he firmly refused to do so. He led an austere life, his time being taken up in official work and in reading books of devotion.

Narasimha Sastri's bad luck did not end with this. His elder sister, disregarding his advice, insisted on going to Srirangam for the Ekadasi festival of Margasirsha. She went, caught cholera and died there. The child was not then quite two years old.

Once again relations who had daughters to marry came to our Sastri. They pressed him to marry if only for the sake of the child. Sastri not only refused to marry again, but resigned from his office. As he had both ancient and modern knowledge in ample measure, he very soon attained great fame as a delightful exponent of religious matters. In Madras the people flocked to his lectures in as great numbers as they did to musical performances. Men and women of every caste, learned and unread, all listened to him eagerly. He was called Gitaprasanga Siromani, meaning, "The jewel among Gita lecturers."

Thus many months passed. Can the *karma* of past births be deceived? The man who had led an austere life for so long became a fool that Wednesday night.

He lived in a terrace-roofed house in the street behind the Veeresalingam Girls' Hostel. Both he and the girls happened to stand on their respective terraces at the same time. Sastri's eyes sought indulgence. For two or three days the same coincidence occurred. The girls did not like this and sent the anonymous letter described above.

III

The postman knocked at the door. He went and received the letter himself. He was about to throw it into the fire. The unexpected disgrace overwhelmed him. Then, for a while, he was immersed in thought. Instead of destroying the letter, he folded it carefully and kept it in his bag.

He was sunk in remorse. His vow was falsified and his learning

had come to naught. He was in deep pain, not knowing how to bear this disgrace.

He took up a book aimlessly and tried to read, but was unable to do so. His mind refused to turn from his disgrace. "Oh God! Am I becoming evil? Sitaram!" he cried and invoked his favourite deity and prayed for help.

He did not get any sleep that night. He remembered his dead wife and sister. He made up his mind to leave Madras and return to his native village. But how could he break his engagement to give a Gita lecture in the big cloth-merchant Ramanatham Chettiar's house in Chintadripet on Sunday next? How was he going to lecture at all? Thinking of these immediate problems, he lay awake all night.

IV

The girl students were disappointed. They did not see the sign of the sash and the umbrella on the Siromani's terrace. The next day too passed without any sign. They were sorry that their plan was not working.

"We shall wait another day, Kamatchi," said Kamala.

"He won't be deceived. The Siromani is a clever fellow," said Kamatchi.

"What will you bet?"

"Two rupees."

"All right. Give me two days' time," said Kamala.

On the night of the third day Sastriar was sitting on the open terrace gazing at the sky.

"I am a small particle in this vast and majestic universe, somehow holding to my place while being whirled about in it. How can I adequately realize and condemn my littleness. My care and my fear do not affect you, my God! Protect me! Oh Lord!" So saying, he wept. In this mood of despair, he remained for a long time, and at last fell asleep. His dead wife appeared to him in a dream. She gave him pan and supari on a plate and saying to him,

"Don't despair," disappeared. On seeing this dream, Sastriar's mind cleared a little. The appearance of a woman in a dream was a good omen. It was a good augury for any enterprise. He persuaded himself that his dead wife had come to him and said that he should marry again. "What the girls have said is true. It is no use trying to suppress one's nature when it is not ripe for austerity. When the mind is impure, what is the good of physical suppression? I have disregarded the scriptures out of egotism. It is good to marry again," he decided within himself. He saw God's design in the girls' mischief.

Next morning, he spread his silk-bordered sash on the line and hung his umbrella on it.

There was great jubilation in the hostel. Kamala and Kamu were dancing in glee.

"Give me my two rupees," cried Kamala.

"All right, you start for Vankipuram," said Kamatchi.

V

Govindarya of Vankipuram was a man of property. He came of a learned family and was himself a learned man. He had an only daughter named Sundari and no son. He taught his daughter a good deal of Sanskrit. In her twelfth year, when her father was on the look-out for a husband for her, she had a bad fever as a result of which she became lame in the leg and bent in the back. No treatment was of any avail. The great grief that this should have happened to her unmarried daughter broke Govindarya's wife's heart and she sickened and died.

Govindarya tried his best to get his daughter married and to fulfil the ordinance of the Shastras. He promised great sums of money as dowry. But nobody would agree to marry a maimed and deformed girl. The girl was brave. She bore her misfortune calmly and did her best to console her father. She was happy enough studying Tamil and Sanskrit literature.

Sundari managed to do all the work in the house in spite of her physical defects. "Sundari," that was indeed her name, mean-

ing "beautiful." But her mother, alas, could not guess when she was so christened that she would later become so deformed. At the time she was named she did deserve to be so called. The mother had thought her child prettier than any of her relatives' children. Her complexion was perhaps too dark, but what of that? Her nose, forehead and eyebrows were as perfect as a picture. She was quite as good-looking as most other girls if you did not notice her legs and back. Her name could not be changed because she had become deformed. But the fine name got a new associated meaning in Vankipuram. It just signified a hunch-back!

Kamala, author of the anonymous letter, was the beloved daughter of a wealthy landlord in this same town of Vankipuram. She was a friend of Sundari and often went to Govindarya's home.

"Why, Kamala? This is not the vacation, is it? Why have you come home?" asked Govindarya.

"Uncle, I have found a husband for Sundari. You must give your consent," she said.

Govindarya was inclined to be angry, thinking she was making fun of his unfortunate girl. Then Kamala told him her plan and all that had happened.

"This is a little girl's prank. How can he accept Sundari? My misfortune cannot end so easily," said Govindarya, who was plunged again in his grief.

"No, uncle. He is in our hands now. I will make him agree," said Kamala.

"You are bold, Kamala. But only God can help me!" So saying he wept bitterly.

"Father! I beseech you not to lament on my account," said brave Sundari.

Next morning they heard a carriage pulling up at their house. Narasimha Sastri slowly stepped down from it. Kamala welcomed him and led him into the house with all the boldness of the modern Indian girl.

Narasimha Sastri took Kamala who had met him at the door to be the proposed bride and entered the house quite pleased with

his good fortune. But when he understood the situation and looked at Sundari he was greatly disappointed. For a moment he felt disgusted and might even have shown the feeling in his looks. But he soon controlled himself. His learning was not a veneer and came to his assistance.

Even when he had started from Madras, he was in a mood of religious detachment, thinking he was obeying a divine command. So when he saw Sundari, he said to himself: "Very well, this is my trial. I must win in the test. This is a just penance for my crime of bringing scripture and learning into contempt. I must consider myself fortunate if I am able to give shelter to this girl to whom fate has been so unkind." He overcame the first feeling of repulsion.

Kamala did not leave things at that. She cleverly enlarged on Sundari's wide reading, especially her knowledge of Sanskrit. Sastriar began to feel satisfied. When Sundari began to speak, her physical form seemed to melt away and only her soul shone. He was sure she would be an excellent mother to his daughter, Lakshmi. He said to himself, "My soul will be cleansed of the impurity encrusting it, and will attain a better state. I have not yet realized that body and soul are two different things. My mind is still in darkness and ignorance. I must still find true enlightenment. The beauty of the soul is not affected by the deformity of the body that encases it. The soul is a separate entity, a thing of beauty and joy. That is the assurance that our scriptures give us," and reminded himself of all the Vedantic philosophy he had learned.

The conversation ended. The marriage was settled. Govindarya's happiness knew no bounds.

"Sir, you are an angel come to save me, not my son-in-law!" he said and touched Sastri's feet as if he were a holy person. Thinking of his dead wife, he could not resist his tears. He wept hysterically.

"Uncle! You should not weep now on this auspicious occasion. This is a time for joy," said Kamala.

"Child! May you live long! And may every good betide you," said Govindarya to Kamala and he gave her coconut and betel-leaves in a plate. There were tears in the college-girl's eyes also.

"Our Gita Siromani is very good old man, Kamatchi. We only thought of making fun of him and making him feel ashamed of his amorousness. As a result now, his marriage has been really settled," she told her friend and accomplice of the anonymous letter when she got back to the hostel.

She added, "The wedding will take place in the Tirupati temple and will be a brief one-day ceremony. I have to attend it. Govindarya says he cannot do without me."

Kamatchi said, "We shan't be able to get leave."

Kamala said, "Surely we shall. We must go to the wedding."

"If you are going, I shall go too," said Kamatchi.

Two other girls joined in and they all formed a happy party that decided to go to Tirupati to attend Narasimha Sastri's wedding.

"The old man's marriage will be grand," declared all the girls and were waiting eagerly for the day of departure.

VI

The news spread in Madras. There was a great stir in religious circles. "We hear that Siromani Sastriar is marrying. What is the girl's age? What is her native place?" enquired some. Some said she was eight years old, others twelve, others said that she was quite a grown-up girl. It was the talk in buses and in trams and everywhere. The social reformers were greatly agitated.

The Society-for-Equal-Rights-for-Women in Alwarpet met and passed a strong resolution that marriages of men over forty-five should be prevented. This was later amended after discussion, the age-limit being raised to forty-nine, the Society even offering to ignore the limit altogether in cases where the bride was over thirty-five.

Two years passed. The scene is a small village on the bank of the river Cauveri. "Mother! They all say you are not good-

looking. Why do they say this, mother, when you are so nice-looking? Tell me why, mother." It was Narasimha Sastri's little girl Lakshmi that was putting this question to her mother.

"My darling, look at my back. Isn't it bent like a bow? Others have straight backs. I walk on my hands. That is why everyone that sees me makes fun of me," said her step-mother Sundari.

"Mother! Does your back pain you?"

"No, child. It does not."

"What if you are bent? The calf also walks like you. Is it not pretty?"

"What does Lakshmi say?" asked Narasimha Sastri as he entered the house.

"Lakshmi says I am as pretty as a calf," Sundari said. "She thinks that the people's idea that I am ugly is all wrong. What is your opinion?"

Sastri replied, "I agree with Lakshmi." Father's arrival made the child more talkative. She stood in front of her mother and said, "Look! When I see you, I do not see your body."

"If you open your eyes wide enough you will see my body," said Sundari.

"No, no, mother. If I see your body, I do not see you. If I see you, I do not see your body," said Lakshmi.

"Sundari, do you realize what the child is saying?" asked Sastri.

"The child is speaking nonsense, words that have no meaning," said Sundari.

Narasimha Sastri embraced the child and appeared immersed in breathless joy.

He said, "Sundari, after hearing Lakshmi's words today, the meaning of a hymn in the Upanishads became clear to me. The Upanishads speak like a child."

"Let me also know it," said Sundari.

" 'The soul is the person that appears in the eyes.' That is the verse. When I found you, I thought I had in a way understood the hymn. But the child's talk today has made it clearer to me. When two people see each other with perfect love, the body disappears from either's sight. Soul sees soul. That is what Lakshmi says. That is also what the hymn says."

Lakshmi said, "You say that the soul and the body are different?"

Sastri said: "No, no! That is only part of the truth. Look here. I am seeing You now, your body is not what I sense. It has vanished. Your eyes, nose, ears, face, all have disappeared. Only You remain. That is the person that appears in the eyes."

Sundari too had read the Upanishads. "They interpret this differently," she said. "When a seer or *jnani* closes his eyes and is in deep meditation he sees his soul with his mind's eye. The commentator says that this is what the verse means."

Narasimha Sastri said: "It also means that. But what Lakshmi says is the better and more practical meaning. I am neither sage nor seer. Yet when I see you with concentrated affection, do I see your body? It is your soul I see and I am content. When our eyes meet and we rejoice in it, it is not your face but your whole being which discloses itself to my eyes. If I see your nose, forehead, or the *tilak* mark on it, or your eyebrow, only that part of you is seen, but You vanish from my sight."

In short, Narasimha Sastri and Sundari led a truly philosophical and elevated life marked by mutual affection and regard. Beauty is really nothing but love. Beauty and ugliness of body are only seen before marriage. What is permanent is character. After marriage when soul unites with soul, face and body vanish. This is true for both man and woman. "Look at her nose, look at her teeth, look at her mouth." All these remarks are made by outsiders and may concern them. But for the pair united by love, these are things which have vanished and cease to give either pleasure or pain.

THE FATAL CART

Karuppan was given a separate home. It was the custom among farmers, when a son was joined by his wife, to build for him a separate hut to live in; they expected him to get his living by his own labour. No doubt it was a good custom. Karuppan's parents were aged. They lived in their ancestral house in the village. Karuppan's elder brother lived in a hut on the farm. When Karuppan now began to live apart, the land was divided into three parts. Karuppan was given one. The elder son cultivated his own and the father's portions. All joined and built a mud hut for Karuppan. They gave Karuppan a pair of bullocks and two goats. Karuppan was thirty years old, and was of robust build. His wife, Parvati, was the prettiest and most active girl in the village. A peasant girl, she had the bearing of a queen. The ant and the honey-bee may show idleness, but not Karuppan's wife. When she worked in her new home as if she were born and bred there, and every now and then cast a sweet smile on him, Karuppan thought that he had nothing more to wish for in this world and his heart was filled with gladness.

Parvati had brought a little money with her from her mother's house. They bought a milch buffalo with it. The rains did not fail and Karuppan worked hard. The crop was plentiful. Parvati worked all day without losing her temper. Karuppan, the bullocks, the buffalo and the farm was her world. If she had leisure, she would spin at the wheel she had brought from her mother's house. On moonlit nights her sister-in-law would come to visit her and the two would sit up long, spinning and chatting.

Parvati's buffalo was of a good milch breed. Parvati would churn the curds early in the morning, wash and clean up the house, and then go out to sell the butter-milk in the weavers' street. On market-days she would heat the butter and sell the ghee. Thus she made about three rupees every week.

After a year, Karuppan began to think of a big scheme. He said to his wife, "Our farm is small. We do not always have work to do. Why should we not buy a cart and try to make some money? The bullocks will then have work all the year. Look at Raman, our uncle's son. He earns at least two or three rupees a week on his cart. Sometimes he even gets four rupees. Why should we not add a little to what you have saved and buy a cart? Veeran is going away to Udumalpet. He is selling his land to pay off his debts. We can get his cart cheap."

Parvati: "No, no. We don't want Veeran's cart. We shall not buy that unlucky cart. It will bring his ill-luck with it. Moreover, where is the need to borrow money and buy a cart? We are not in want of anything now."

Karuppan: "Don't talk nonsense. Veeran was a drunkard and ruined himself by drink. The cart had nothing to do with his misfortune. It is a good strong cart. We won't be ruined if we borrow twenty rupees. It is not impossible to repay it."

"I have been thinking of buying an ear-ring with my money," said Parvati.

"I wish you wouldn't be so silly; you are as beautiful as a queen. Ornaments will only spoil your beauty," said Karuppan.

Parvati said, "If women desire anything, you men always say this. Well, what do women know of business matters? Ask your father, and do what you think proper. Don't ask me."

Karuppan was bent upon buying the cart. So when he asked his father, he did not say anything against his wish. The cart was bought within a week. It cost him all the money he had and forty rupees more, which he borrowed from the zamindar of the village.

II. THE DEMON

Karuppan used frequently to drive his cart out for hire. If he went very far, he would not return the same night, nor even the next morning sometimes. His cousin, Raman, used to accompany him on these occasions in his own cart. Within a

year, Karuppan was initiated into the toddy shop. Soon it was his rule never to miss the toddy shop on any of his cart trips. The income from the cart grew less day by day. It was hard to get good fodder for the bullocks. One day when Karuppan returned home in an unsatisfactory condition, Parvati was shocked. She had no knowledge till then of what had been going on.

"You have ruined me," she cried.

"Shut up. I have not robbed you," said Karuppan.

Parvati was enraged. "You have drunk toddy," she cried.

"Well, what if I have? I have not spent your father's money. Who is to question me?" he said.

"Don't enter this hut. Go to your father's house. I have not cooked any food today," said Parvati. Her face darkened with anger.

"Burn your face. I won't die for want of your rotten food," he said and threatened to beat her.

This happened frequently. Karuppan would sometimes beat her. Parvati would take her child and go to her sister-in-law's house. They would confer there about Karuppan's failing. Things grew worse and worse. The bullocks aged rapidly and were unable to draw the cart. Karuppan sold them at the fair at a loss. He did not have the money to buy a new pair. He swore before Parvati that he would not in future go anywhere near a toddy shop, and extorted from her all that she had saved by selling butter-milk and ghee and by spinning. Then he borrowed a little money from his widowed elder sister and bought a new pair of bulls. Three months went by. The zamindar sent a man for the money that was due to him. Karuppan begged for time. The period for repayment was extended once, twice and then thrice. Finally, the zamindar's servants seized one of the bullocks and took it away. Karuppan ran to the zamindar. He begged for a month's time.

"I won't allow even one day. Beat him with shoes, the drunkard! You do not pay your debt, but you have money to go and buy a new pair of bullocks. Who let you do it?" said the zamindar in a rage.

"Please do not speak like that. You have been a father to us. Give me but one more month. I will surely come and repay you the money."

"It is all useless. I can't wait a minute more. On Wednesday I am going to send your bullock to the market."

"Oh, Sir, my family will be ruined! Please do not do it," cried Karuppan and went near his bullock.

"Turn him out! Don't let the bullock go. Thief, go and bring the money. Otherwise, I shall have the bullock sold next Wednesday," said the irate zamindar.

"I am not a vagabond. If you grant me further time, you won't lose your money," entreated Karuppan.

"Impossible," said the zamindar finally.

"I shall pay interest. Please take your money with interest," said Karuppan.

"Beat him! Throw a shoe at him, the dog! Interest! Interest, indeed! How is he going to pay interest? Borrow money from Qadr Khan and pay down at once. If I do not get my money tomorrow, I shall have your bullock sold for anything it will fetch," said the zamindar angrily and went in.

"There is no other way, Karuppan. We must go to Qadr Saheb. He alone can help you," said the zamindar's clerk.

III. DEBT

Karuppan went to his father and begged him to ask his brother to lend him money. His brother wanted to help as the old man desired, but his wife objected.

"If you lend him any money, it will not be repaid. Let him get it from the Muslim money-lender. We find it hard enough to get food for ourselves. There is no certainty of the rains being good this year. If we do not have a good harvest, we shall starve. Who will help us in these hard times?" she said to her husband.

At last Karuppan went to Qadr Khan. He was an "instalment"

money-lender. He knew the financial condition of every person in the village, including the zamindar.

"You do not know. My dear fellow, even the zamindar has asked me for money," Qadr Khan said.

Karuppan: "Big people's troubles will end somehow. How am I to live, if I lose my bullock? It is only you who can save me now."

Qadr Khan: "How can I? I have promised all the money I have to the zamindar."

Karuppan: "Oh, Sahib, don't say so. I shall be ruined. Should you not help the poor? Why tell me about the zamindar?"

Qadr Khan: "True, the poor should be helped. But I have already promised."

After a long time had passed thus in denial and entreaty, the money-lender at last yielded. Karuppan received forty-five rupees on signing a bond for sixty. He also undertook to repay the whole sum in a year, in monthly instalments of five rupees. There was no "interest" charged. But, if he failed to pay the instalment agreed upon in any month, he should pay a "fine" of one rupee.

"Karuppa, I have lent you the money believing in your honesty, industry and capacity to earn. Do not fail to repay the money in regular instalments. Leave off drinking. You are a good man. You have a wife and a child. You will have more children. If you drink, you will be utterly ruined," Qadr Khan advised him.

Karuppan paid off his debt and drove his bullock home. He gave the remaining money into Parvati's hands.

"Look here. I won't touch liquor, toddy or arrack hereafter, I swear to you. I do not wish to handle any money. You do what you like with this. I will give whatever I earn into your hands," said he.

Parvati thought God had turned his grace on her. She was happy. She found a new strength in her body. She went about her work more cheerfully than ever.

IV. WAGE-WORK

There was nothing to do in the farm now. Parvati could not remain idle at home. "I must try to do some work. How can I remain doing nothing, when my husband is in debt?" she thought. Qadr Khan started building a new house by the side of his old one. Bricklayers were working busily. Three or four girls were working for daily wages there. Parvati joined them.

She would get up early in the morning and clean the house. Then she would milk the cattle and churn the butter-milk and take it at once to sell it in the village. She begged her customers not to keep her waiting but to send her away as soon as possible. This they did, for Parvati was a favourite with them all. She would return home, drink her gruel and feed the baby. Then she would leave the child in her sister-in-law's house and go to the house-building work. At noon, she had just sufficient time to run home, drink some guel, feed the baby, and run back to work. She would be released from work by the building *mistri* only after sunset. She would return home and begin her cooking only when it was dark. She did all this cheerfully. The work was indeed hard and she got only two annas a day as wages; but that was much in hard times.

The belief that her husband would not drink again and had become a reformed man kept up her spirits. Karuppan did keep his word for a month or two. Then he became the old Karuppan again. All that he earned once more began to find its way to the toddy shop. Not a copper piece reached Parvati's hands. He would stay away from home for two or three days running and return with just a little fodder for the cattle and nothing else. Parvati thought for a small sum of money he would not scruple to tell lies. After a time, he even ceased this attempt at cheating. Parvati left off asking. She continued to work hard both at home and outside for wages day and night.

And then Karuppan was behind with the instalment on his debt. One day Qadr Khan came and demanded his money. He used hard words. Though Parvati was fairly accustomed to them

from the *mistri* she now heard words of such an indecent nature that she went in, gathered all the copper coins she had saved, and threw them before him. She had continued to save something in spite of Karuppan's frequent extortions.

Parvati was in tears throughout that day. She was ailing, yet she went about her work as usual next morning. She could not forget the indecent words of the Muslim money-lender. She, who had worked so hard and cheerfully till then without thought of her sex, was now changed. She grew afraid of the language of the men who worked with her. As her fear grew, the wickedness of the evil-minded increased. Qadr Khan's son used to supervise the building of the house. His eyes and words began to take a sinister meaning.

From the time she began working for wages, she had been unable to take proper care of her child. The child began to waste and caught fever. There is for ailing people in villages neither medicine nor any other relief. They tried branding the child once or twice. It was no good. After suffering for a week it closed its eyes for ever. Karuppan wept like a woman. His old father consoled him, saying, "God has taken away what he gave." "Uncle, why is God trying me like this? I have never done anybody any harm," Parvati wept to her father-in-law.

"Foolish girl, don't weep. You are not old. There is time for seven or eight children more. Not all the seeds that are thrown into the field sprout. Yet we do not weep over it."

Parvati: "Why should I wish to have a child again? I have seen enough joy and misery here on earth. I wish God would take me away. That is all."

The old man laughed and said: "See that your husband does not waste in the toddy shop the little he earns. You will soon forget this sorrow, and live to get more children and lead a happy life."

"I will not touch the cursed poison again. I swear upon my life. Blast me if I ever touch it again," Karuppan vowed.

V. VILLAINY

Parvati's troubles were not over. Ill-luck continued. The very next Wednesday, when passing by the Ramapuram liquor shop, Karuppan forgot his pledge. He had carried some bags on his cart to Tiruppur, and while returning with some other cart-drivers, he stopped before the arrack-shop and cried, "Hullo! Who is that getting down for a drink? I don't want it, I don't go near the cursed thing."

Another cartman said, "If you don't want it, keep your money tied up safe. Why do you shout?" and jumping down from the cart entered the arrack-shop. Karuppan followed after some time and told himself that it would be the last time.

It was the same story the next Wednesday. He told his companion, "Why not be merry and care-free while we have money."

His companion said, "Let the money go. It was not born with us, nor will it go with us when we depart this life. Who is to prevent us from spending as we like what we earn with the sweat of our brows?"

Another philosopher, who had listened to this, said, "You are right. This world is not everlasting. Everything is a delusion. We may not see tomorrow the people whom we meet today. Who is going to live for a thousand years? When we close our eyes for ever, whose will be the money? Yours or mine?"

The fourth carter said, "Neither. It is neither yours nor mine. It all belongs to this fellow in the arrack-shop." They all laughed loudly.

"You are all fools. You talk like learned men. How this stuff warms one up as it goes inside!" said another.

"These Chettys should be kicked, I say. The rogues cheat us. They have reduced the hire for carts," said Karuppan.

After talking thus till it was dark, they would return to their carts.

The date of payment of Qadr Khan's next instalment was fast approaching. Parvati told Karuppan to repay the money before he came to ask for it.

"Damn the fellow. If he comes and talks indecently, I will smash his skull," said Karuppan.

Probably because the man was otherwise busy, he did not turn up for quite a long time. Karuppan forgot all about it.

One day Qadr Khan's son Ismail came. But instead of demanding payment of the instalment, he asked Karuppan if he would take some bags of chillies to Ramapuram.

"I have to take hay for Komara Koundan. He asked me a week ago," said Karuppan.

"That is not possible, Karuppa. There is no hurry for Komara Koundan's hay. If we do not send the bags today, we shall lose a good bargain," said Ismail Khan.

Karuppan at last agreed. When the Sahib had kindly forgotten to ask for his dues, how could he refuse?

That same evening, when Parvati was alone in her house cooking, Ismail Khan came and standing outside, asked her, "Has your husband returned?"

"He has not returned," said Parvati.

"True, how could he return so soon! There is an arrack-shop on the way." So saying, Ismail Khan entered the house.

"Oh yes! The poor have to be ruined and made to go through hell. That is why they keep these liquor shops going," said Parvati.

Ismail sat down without her asking him. Thinking that he was waiting for Karuppan's return, Parvati went about her work without minding him.

Ismail continued to talk. "Are you not tired of your husband's ways?" he asked.

"How can that be, Sir. We must bear with our husbands, for good or evil," said Parvati without turning.

"True. He is your husband. You can't leave your married husband," said Ismail.

After some time he said in a tone of pity: "A beautiful woman like you has to get on with a drunken husband like him. It is a great misfortune."

Parvati did not say anything. After a while, Ismail went away, without waiting for Karuppan.

Next day also Ismail sent Karuppan away on some business and came to Parvati's house in the evening. He brought with him a quantity of palm *gur* which he pressed upon Parvati, saying that he had it from Mooppan for a present.

"I find an indescribable pleasure in seeing you," he said.

Parvati thought within herself, "I do not know what all this is for," and was afraid. "Why do you show fear when I come near you? Are you afraid that I shall trouble you for the dues? If you speak cheerfully to me, I don't care for my money," said Ismail.

Parvati held out for a long time, but every time she saw Karuppan drunk, her will to resist weakened. At last she gave up the struggle.

VI. WRATH

Outside the Keerambur toddy shop, customers of the drummer and tanning castes and other untouchables gathered opposite the small opening in the wall made for serving toddy to them, and were making a confused noise. Inside, it was a regular hell, spittle, garbage and dirt. There was a swarm of flies. The odour of stale toddy filled the air. People were seated in large groups everywhere, shouting loudly.

Karuppan said, "If you talk to me like that again, I shall knock all your teeth out."

Palani replied, "You break my teeth! Will you? My Lord! Look at the fellow! He cannot even keep his wife straight!"

At this, Karuppan threw his toddy pot on Palani's face. The wounded fellow's nose began to bleed.

Someone cried, "You fools! You are spilling all the toddy. To waste such good stuff for deceitful women! Never trust women. Women are a faithless lot."

Palani continued to bleed in his nose. "Alas! Palani is dead," said another and went to him and wiped the blood from his face. Palani was not seriously hit. He got up in a rage and threw a brick at Karuppan. Karuppan managed to dodge it.

The toddy-vendor shouted, "I want no quarrelling inside the shop."

Karuppan ran out. Palani who ran after him stumbled over the door-step and fell down. Karuppan reached his cart and drove away shouting and abusing loudly.

Karuppan reached home earlier than usual. The house was bolted from inside.

"Hullo! What are you doing inside? How long am I to be kept waiting outside? Open the door. Water the bullocks," cried Karuppan.

There was the sound of moving feet inside. The door was not opened. Karuppan kept on shouting. Parvati opened the door, came out and standing before Karuppan said, "Come with me and see the buffalo. There is something wrong with it. It kicks, and won't be milked."

"Let the buffalo go to hell! I am thirsty. Bring me a little water." He went in.

Ismail, who was inside, tried to escape moving close to the wall.

"You whore!" cried Karuppan and taking a pick-axe that was lying nearby threw it at Parvati.

Then he took up a sickle, and hacked at the fleeing Ismail with it with all his strength. Ismail fell down wounded. Blood poured from his head in a stream. Then Karuppan dashed at

Parvati. She fled to her brother-in-law's house. Karuppan went after her for some distance. Then, finding the neighbours coming towards him he turned back. And he saw Ismail again struggling to get up. He made a mad rush forward. "I will finish him," he said. But many people had gathered now. They stopped him and took away his sickle.

VII. HELL

Karuppan and Parvati were locked up in Ramapuram police station in separate cells.

Several policemen walked up and down in front of the bars of her cell and smiled at her. They all sought an opportunity to talk to her. But she was plunged in grief. Her soul was in agony. She was like an animal, brought up in the freedom of the forest, which has been caught and for the first time put in a cage.

"Speak out the truth. Only then can we find a way for releasing you," said the Sub-Inspector to Karuppan.

"What is there to hide? I know nothing. I returned from Karumandur only on Friday," said Karuppan.

Inspector: "There is no use in all this kind of humbug, my dear fellow! Your wife has told us everything."

Karuppan: "Ah! Has that devil let it all out? That accursed woman has been my ruin."

Inspector: "Yes, it is true. All trouble is due to women. Come now, give us your story."

Karuppan: "What is there for me to tell you? You told me just now that she had revealed all."

Inspector: "True. But, we must get it from your mouth. Otherwise, you will get seven years' rigorous imprisonment. Do you realize that?"

"Let it be seven years. I am not going to tell you anything," said Karuppan firmly.

"This country-fellow will not give you the right answer if

asked politely. You have got to make him talk," said a constable who was standing near. And he described an operation that cannot be put down in words here.

"Yes, examine him thoroughly," said the Sub-Inspector. He emphasized the word "examine" in a significant way.

Parvati also was dealt with.

"Look here, woman. You appear to be innocent. You can escape if you tell the truth. Did Qadr Khan and his son come to your place on Friday evening?" asked the head-constable.

"Father and son? No," said Parvati.

"All right. So Ismail came alone?" he said and winked at the constables near him.

"Masters! Please, don't talk to me like this. Why should a Muslim come to my house? How can you put such indecent questions to a woman? Send me home. My father-in-law and mother-in-law are there. They will tell you everything, if you ask them."

"Oh! You want to go home, do you? Don't be in such a hurry. Woman, if you tell the truth you can go home. If not, you cannot go. You shall remain here."

"Oh God!" cried Parvati.

"You can't get anything out of her by soft questioning. She is a cunning woman. Many are the youths the bitch has ruined," said the head-constable.

"Masters, have you no daughters? Take pity on an innocent and poor woman like me. Look upon me as one of your own sisters," pleaded Parvati.

"You there, bring the hot iron," cried the head-constable.

"Sir, ask my husband. He will tell you everything. Why do you torture a helpless woman?" wailed Parvati.

"Do you think we have not questioned your husband? We have asked him and he has revealed all," said the Sub-Inspector.

"Has he indeed told everything?" cried Parvati in agony.

"Oh yes! He has. He says it is all the outcome of your wickedness."

She wrung her hands and cried, "Oh! my God!" and fell down on the ground.

"There is no use weeping, woman! You can't cheat us by all this. You are a wonderful actress. How many men have you ruined like this?"

"Masters, don't speak like that. You are like brothers all to me. The man asked me for his dues."

"Ah! are you coming round?" said the head-constable and, turning to the Sub-Inspector, said, "Did I not tell you?" Then he looked at Parvati and asked, "Look here, woman! If you tell the truth, you will be let off. We are not eager to send a woman to jail. Your husband will escape with a light punishment. We promise you."

"Sir, let me go home tonight. I will tell you everything," said Parvati.

"Good. Let her go. It looks as if she wishes to speak out the truth," said the Sub-Inspector.

"If she goes home, the truth will never come out again," warned the head-constable.

The Sub-Inspector whispered into the constable's ear, "We have not arrested her. How can she be kept in the lock-up all night."

"All right. We must then send her home under guard and ask her to be brought up again tomorrow."

VIII. THIS WORLD

Karuppan's father entreated his eldest son to engage a lawyer. They sold Karuppan's cart for meeting the expenses. When that sum was spent, they pawned his buffalo with some relatives in the next village, and borrowed some money. They cursed Parvati to

their heart's content, as she was, according to them, the cause of all this misery.

Karuppan's lawyer put up witnesses before the magistrate to prove that at the time of the crime he was in Karumandur. When they heard the lawyer speak for more than three hours, Karuppan's relatives were much pleased.

Qadr Khan was sworn as a witness. He stated that he and his son went to Karuppan's house to ask for his dues, that the latter abused him, and that on their insisting on payment of the dues, Karuppan took out a sickle and tried to hit him with it, but his son, Ismail, who threw himself in, caught the blow and would have died had it not been that it missed his skull and cut off his right ear.

Parvati was also examined as a witness. She denied everything, as the lawyer had instructed her. The evidence she had given before the police, she alleged, was forced from her.

The magistrate sent the case up to the sessions court.

Karuppan's bullocks were also sold now. A new lawyer was engaged for the sessions court. Parvati went to her native village to stay in her brother's house till the trial was over.

Parvati's brother was a very poor fellow. He found it hard to make his living. His wife, Nallayee, burned with indignation to see Parvati come to quarter herself with them. Then one day as Parvati was speaking to her brother at the door of the house and weeping, she came out shouting, "We can't admit all sorts of people into the house. We have enough trouble in getting our own food."

So saying she bolted the door on the outside and went out to the farm.

"Parvati, collect the manure in the cow-shed and take it to the farm," said her brother. Parvati tried to help them by tireless work. She worked hard in return for her meals. But her sister-in-law's heart did not melt. She was always insulting Parvati. Parvati bore everything with patience.

Then one morning a constable arrived at the house. As Karuppan's case was to come up for trial, he asked Parvati to go and give her evidence before the sessions court. To Parvati, who was tortured by her sister-in-law, even this summons was a consolation. The constable was an old Muslim. He was tall, had a big moustache and was fierce to look at, but his speech was kindly like a father's.

They were walking towards Erode, where they had to take the train. The constable said to Parvati, "Tell everything as it happened, sister. The judge may take pity on you and let off your husband."

"How can I speak the truth, Sir, when it is so disgraceful?" asked Parvati.

"Where is the disgrace? People make mistakes. It is rare to find one who has not been deceived like that at least once. God keeps watch over us all. He sometimes allows us to commit sins. It is His will."

"Do you think I should tell everything? I shall be an outcaste. My husband will not take me back. What shall I do then?" asked Parvati.

"If you speak the truth, your husband will be let off with six months. If not, he will go in for six years. A somewhat similar case happened before. If you help your husband now, he will be grateful to you. He can give something to the temple and get you readmitted amongst your caste-people. It is always good to tell the truth whatever may happen."

Parvati was silent. Something inside her urged her to tell the truth. But the next minute something else rose in her mind and suppressed the good impulse. Fear and confusion seized her mind. "Oh God!" she kept on muttering to herself.

The policeman put her into the train at Erode. It was the first time that Parvati had travelled in a train. The crowd at the station and the motion of the train frightened her. Then it got merged in the confusion of her thoughts and everything whirled.

The train was moving rapidly. Suddenly a small boy with a smiling face came out, as it were, from nowhere and began to sing. He was blind in both eyes. A ragged boy stood by him and sang with him.

"You rogues! Where were you hiding all this while?" asked the constable.

The boys smiled without answering and continued to sing. They sang divinely, with a tenderness of feeling which it seems you only learn in the streets and not in the music school. When the song was over, the blind boy held out his hand, which the other one took hold of and led him round in the carriage. Everyone paid something. Parvati also untied a knot in her sari's border and gave him a copper piece. The song kept echoing in her ears all through the day. The words had a deep meaning which she did not grasp. But some of the verses and the piteous strain of the boy's voice kept returning again and again.

What sins did I not commit
That mother nor kin did suspect?
Have I not fed, having killed?
And killed having fed?
Have I yet learnt not to wish?
The wish that increasingly wishes
What should never be wished.
Offending caste and religion,
Will my folk receive me?
Will the men of religion take me?
I that have crowned a life of deceit
With open shame, my sister, Oh my sister!

IX. THE LAW

Reaching Salem, the policeman took Parvati to a poor man's eating-house. He asked the woman-manager to give Parvati a "half-meal."

A half-meal is a technical eating-house word.

The eating-house-woman asked Parvati, "Why did you come to Salem?" When Parvati said, "I have been brought here for a

sessions case," a big crowd soon gathered round her. They were all men who had come there booked to leave for tea plantations in Ceylon.

As an older murder case was being tried in the court Karuppan's was not taken up that day. When the case came up next day, Parvati was not called upon to give evidence. The Public Prosecutor said he did not want her.

Karuppan's lawyer submitted that he was going to examine her as witness for the defence and requested that she be detained for that purpose. In the evening, Karuppan's elder brother took her to his lawyer. The lawyer advised her to tell the whole truth as the policeman had suggested on the way.

She, of course, desired to save her husband. But she recoiled from a confession of her crime.

"I will do as God directs me to do," she said in the end.

"Wretched woman! Can you speak of God? Beat her with an old shoe," cried Karuppan's brother.

She trembled and said, "I will do as you ask me. What can a woman do?"

This was just what the lawyer had wanted. He asked everybody to go away, and spoke apart with Karuppan's brother for some time.

Next day Parvati waited outside the court under a tree along with many others for quite a long time. Then suddenly someone shouted her name in a loud voice. Parvati was startled. A peon came and said in a peremptory voice, "Come," and conducted her to the witness-box. What she saw there dazed her. In the western corner of the hall she saw her husband standing behind bars like a wild beast and staring at her. With the hair on his head, chin and lip much overgrown, he looked fierce, and she even found it hard to recognize him. If a poor peasant is kept locked up in a prison and is not allowed any bath or shave for two or three months, he soon gets to look a murderer.

"Alas, all this misery has been brought about by me," said Parvati to herself and went through indescribable mental torture. She managed to stand erect with great effort, by holding on to the bar in front of her. When the clerk cried to her to take the oath her head seemed to swim.

"I swear before God that I am speaking the truth. When I was cooking that evening—"

The judge looked at the Public Prosecutor and said, "She seems to have got the whole thing well by heart." That was how they always dealt with witnesses called on behalf of the defence.

"Doesn't matter. She will forget everything soon," remarked the judge again.

The people assembled in the court laughed loud in appreciation of the judge's humour. The Public Prosecutor's laughter was the most vociferous. The other lawyers echoed him after a time. The lawyer for defence faintly smiled.

"Repeat after me what I tell you," said the clerk sternly. Parvati's confusion increased.

She wondered, "What the lawyer and my brother-in-law said seems to be of no use now. Should I now speak only what the clerk teaches me to say?"

After she was sworn in the usual way, they began to question her. Sometimes she did not understand the question. "When she was cooking, Ismail came and made improper proposals to her. While she was refusing, her husband came in suddenly and threw a shovel at her. She ran out terrified. She remembered nothing else afterwards except having seen blood streaming from Ismail's head." This was her story, just what the lawyer had instructed her to say.

"You wretch!" cried Karuppan from the prison-bar. He still hoped that they would produce evidence to prove his presence in Karmandur at the time of the offence. His lawyer then went up to him and told him something in his ear. He seemed satisfied. The examination was over. The assessors held that the attempt at

murder by Karuppan was not proved, and that he had only caused grievous hurt on great provocation.

The judge adjourned the court to the next day. When the court sat next day, judgment was delivered. The verdict of the assessors was set aside and the judge held that the attempt to murder was proved. He accepted the evidences of Qadr Khan and Ismail, that they went to Karuppan for demanding the dues, that the drunken offender attacked them with a fatal weapon and that Qadr Khan and his son luckily escaped the attack and thereafter the presence of the crowd saved them. He also held that the evidence of Karuppan's wife was not trustworthy, being naturally biased in favour of her husband, and further her statements before the police and before the magistrate were conflicting. He sentenced the accused to six years' rigorous imprisonment. He also recommended the Public Prosecutor to consider taking action against Parvati for giving false evidence.

When Karuppan heard the judgment, he cried, "The *chandali* has deceived me. When your wife betrays you, tell me, masters, how can you keep quiet?"

"Take him away," said the judge.

The police marched him off. "Write out all that you wish to say and let us appeal to the High Court," they consoled him.

X. RELEASE

The trial was over. None of Parvati's relations now cared what happened to her. She reached Ramapuram with great difficulty. The same old local constable that brought her to Salem went with her on her way back.

"You ought to have told the truth from the first. Because you did not speak the truth in the first court, the judge did not believe you. You did not speak the whole truth even here."

The words fell on her ears, but she did not appear to understand them. They reached Ramapuram long after nightfall. The Muslim constable told her to sleep on the verandah of his house that night and go to her brother's house next morning.

She lay down as she was told but could not sleep. How could she face her sister-in-law again? Every hope was gone. God had forsaken her. She must end this miserable life now. That was the only way left. How thankful one must be that there was at least that means left to escape all sorrows. Nobody could rob her of that.

After keeping awake for a long time she fell fast asleep in the morning out of sheer exhaustion. The Muslim constable, coming out of the house at six in the morning, found her sleeping soundly. He thought, "This woman has sent her husband to jail and is sleeping blissfully. Only fools will believe these faithless women."

Parvati heard the sound of a child crying and got up. She was dreaming that her own child was crying. She awoke, and it took some time for her to realize that her child had been dead a long time, and that she was now a helpless woman, who had lost her husband, home and all.

When she sat up, she found a black-skinned boy standing before her. He had his mouth covered with both hands and made a noise like that of a child crying. Then he changed the mimicry from a crying child to its supposed mother. While doing these tricks by turns, he found Parvati sitting up. He stopped and said, "Mother, give me a copper coin."

"Child, where is your house?" asked Parvati.

"Mother! give me a copper piece!" cried the boy.

"Who is your father?" again asked Parvati.

"I do not know," said the boy.

"Have you no mother?"

"I have. She has left me with the pig-man."

"Who gives you food?"

"I earn my own food. I give the pig-man all the copper I get, and he gives me food. Sometimes he feeds me first and I pay him whenever I manage to save some coppers."

"Where did you learn to make those peculiar sounds?" asked Parvati.

"Oh, I learned that in Tanjore. Please give me something, mother. I must go to the pig-man," he said.

By this time, the policeman came out and frightened the boy away. "These are all rogues. They come thus and spy out everything. Then they lead the burglars in at night and steal. You seem to have slept well in the night," he said.

"God will bless you. You have been like a father to me," said Parvati and burst into tears.

The man was not inclined now to pity her. He thought she was acting. "You can go to your brother's village now. If you start now, you can reach there before noon," he said.

She reached her brother's house at noon, hungry and exhausted beyond words. She still had hoped that her brother's heart would have softened a little. Alas! News of her had reached in advance. Her brother had left for the farm, and his wife was standing at the door.

"The outcaste has come! Don't bring your foul body here. There is no shelter for women who ruin their husbands and run away with Muslims. You hope to sit in my house and suck my husband's blood. I have got children to look after. I don't want your company for them. Go to that man for whom you deceived your husband. There is no room here." Thus she went on.

"Brother! Brother!" cried Parvati, thinking her brother was inside.

"Won't you speak to me? Have you forsaken me? Then God protect me!" she sobbed. Hungry and tired, she left the place weeping.

The sun was burning. But she now felt neither heat, nor hunger. Her lips and throat parched with thirst, she mumbled the names of all the gods she knew. There was a hill-temple in the next village. She turned her steps towards it.

After climbing the hill a short way up, she found herself unable to take a step more. She felt as if she would swoon and sat down under the shadow of a rock.

After a while she got up and again walked up the hill. She reached the temple, but did not go in. She stood outside and prayed. Then she reached a rock that was higher than the temple and worked her way to its summit. The way was hard, but she had now found a new strength. She reached the top. She went to its western edge, and looked down. It was a great and a straight drop from the top of the rock to the foot of the hill. Her head reeled. She sat down. Again getting up, she cried, "Mother Kali. Forgive me my sins, take me to your bosom," and leaped down.

Oh! What joy in a moment! Heaven and earth swam by turns. How cool and refreshing, what bliss! Then she felt an explosion in her head such as she had never heard before, and she sank into fathomless eternal silence. The soul of Parvati escaped from its cage of misery.

RE-BIRTH

When boys and monkeys meet, there is no dearth of fun. All the boys of Velampatti village were in the tamarind grove, climbing up the trees and jumping down and shouting vociferously trying to scare the monkeys perched there. Sometimes the monkeys won. When the biggest among them stopped and growled in anger, the smaller boys forgot the fun and were a bit frightened. The tiny young monkeys were, of course, terribly afraid and did not see any fun in it at all. They jumped from branch to branch to escape from the boys. The boys, of course, thought this was great fun, and their uproar and the screeching of the monkeys were so loud that it could be heard in the village.

Suddenly a boy was heard to scream loudly at the eastern end of the grove. Everyone ran towards the place where the noise came from. A monkey was attacking Mukundan, tearing him with its nails and biting him in the neck, and he was profusely bleeding. Mukundan had been chasing a baby monkey which, while trying to run away from him, slipped from the branch. Mukundan took it up and was running away with it when its mother sprang on him, overpowered him and inflicted grievous wounds. Mukundan was dazed and did not know what to do. He held the baby more tightly in his confusion, while the monkey, enraged at this, mauled him the more fiercely. Though the boys cried, "Let go the baby monkey, let go the young one!", he did not understand. The monkey was big, and in a great rage, and none of the boys dared go near.

A small boy named Mari, who had been observing all this from some distance, cried, "Oh! he will die." He ran up to where Mukundan was struggling, grabbed the little monkey from his hands and began to run. The mother left Mukundan and sprang upon Mari. At this, Mari dropped the little monkey and taking up a stick that lay on the ground stood facing the enraged mother.

The mother seeing its little one running from where it was dropped, ran to join it. The baby clasped the mother and both climbed to the topmost branch of a tree nearby and sat there calmly, as if nothing had happened.

Mukundan lay on the ground senseless. "Mukundan is dead. The monkey has killed him," the boys cried and ran towards the village. Mari, who with Chinan had remained, said, "Chinnan, go and ask mother for a pot of water and bring it quickly," and sitting near Mukundan wiped his face and soothed him. Chinnan ran to the *cheri* and brought water in a mud pot. When Mari took the water and sprinkled it on Mukundan's face, he came to. But the blood continued to flow from his wounds.

"Chinna, you hold him on one side, I will hold him on the other. We must carry him to his house," said Mari and they lifted him and carried him. Mari and Chinnan were small boys, but, being poor, they were not afraid of any kind of hard work.

II

Mukundan's mother was a widow. She was a god-fearing woman. She never lost courage and brought up her son well. She collected all her husband's dues, leased out to a farmer the four acres of dry land that her husband had left her and maintained the family on the rent she got. She sent her boy to the little village school. At home, she told him stories from the *Ramayana,* the *Mahabharata* and the *Bhagavata* Though outwardly brave, there came over her a weariness of life. But faith in God and the traditional mode of life sustained her.

After a bath and the daily devotional routine, she was in the kitchen cooking, when Mari and Chinnan, crying "Mother, mother," entered the house, carrying Mukundan with blood all over his body, and put him down before her. The shocked mother sprang towards her boy, crying "Child!" and, holding up his head, screamed, "What have you done to my child? You wicked boys." It was curious how similar her behaviour was to that of the monkey in the grove when it thought its young one was in danger. Monkey or Sitammal, the mother's heart reacts

in the same way. Mari told her all that had happened. When she heard it, she felt grateful at heart and, smiling sweetly to the boys who had brought her child home, asked, "Who are you, my boys?"

"We are pariah boys, madam," said Mari. On hearing this, Sitammal's face fell.

"Are you pariah boys? You wretches!" she exclaimed. "You have entered my house! Oh God! What shall I do? You have come near the kitchen! O, wicked wretches!" Forgetting everything and crying loudly, she threw a stick of firewood with great force at Chinnan. Mari came between and the log struck his leg and he fell down injured. Chinnan ran out into the street shouting loudly.

"A pariah boy has entered my house," Sitammal cried. "My life is ruined. Not content with that, he goes out shouting and proclaiming my shame to the whole village."

Mari, who had fallen down, got up and, slowly pressing his injured leg, said, "Mother, I saved your boy from the monkey's hands. You have repaid me by breaking my leg." Poor people's children talk well.

"You and your monkey be damned! How am I to get rid of this pariah pollution? Even their very shadow is pollution. But they came to the very place of worship in the house. Oh, God! take pity on me and save me," she cried.

Mari was still standing there, nursing his leg. "You pariah boy! get away," she said and aimed another stick of firewood at him in a great frenzy. This hit him with greater force. Unable to bear the pain, the boy ran out yelling.

A big crowd collected in the street. Some asked what the matter was and others replied, and there was a great uproar. The mother of Mari and Chinnan came from the *cheri* and stood at the end of the street and made a great noise.

III

The story is resumed two years after. Mukundan is now a big boy and reading in the Kamalapuram High School. He had to walk two miles and back daily. But because there were two other boys to keep him company he did not find the walking tedious. Everybody had forgotten the incident that happened during the gambol with the monkeys. A large scar on Mukundan's forehead was the only reminder of what had happened.

But the mind of Mari's mother, Kuppayee, was not at peace. "How can any of us enter a Brahmin's house? The sin will surely devour us. Why did you play with the other boys? God will not spare us. That is the cause of all our troubles at present. The rains have failed and we are starving now. It is all due to the Brahmin woman's curse." She would often thus find fault with her boy attributing all her troubles to the incident. She prayed to the goddess in the village temple, "Holy mother! forgive my boy's sin. He was ignorant," and gave a fowl as a sacrificial offering on three successive Pongal festivals. But, however devoutly she prayed and offered sacrifices, Mariamma did not appear to be appeased. Troubles kept coming one after another. Formerly. her husband visited the toddy shop on market days only. But now, he went there daily. He would come home drunk and ask for food threateningly. When told, "Where can you get food from? You have spent everything on your toddy," he would kick and beat her. If she laboured in the jungle all day to collect a bundle of firewood, sold it for a two-anna piece and came home with it, he would quarrel with her, wrest even that little money from her and take it to the toddy shop. When thus life became unbearable, she would blame her sons, saying "It is all due to the Brahmin woman's curse." When her husband came home drunk and beat her, she would take the beating quietly, saying "Boys, do not weep, we shall go to Kandy. We won't live in this cursed house and this cursed village any more. Let this man die in the toddy shop."

There was not a drop of rain that year. The fields were all

dried up. There was no demand for labour. The lot of the small farmers themselves was very hard. That of the men who worked for wages was still more pitiable. The condition of the pariahs and Chamars was indescribably sad.

So when the agent came to recruit labour for Ceylon, people welcomed him as if he were an angel come to relieve misery. "The Kangani is cheating the poor folk and seducing them away. He is trading on their ignorance. Alas, there is nobody to object to this injustice," said the big farmers of the village. But the pariahs and Chamars thought anything would be better than the misery they suffered. They left the village and went with the agent to Ceylon. Kuppayee also thought that it was the only means left to her to escape misery and gave her name as one of those willing to proceed to Kandy with her children. Her husband at first refused to go with them and they decided to leave him behind to shift for himself. But, in the end, he told them, "I will also come with you. Who will give me food here?" He swore that he would touch neither toddy nor arrack any longer, and begged them to take him with them. Finally all of them went.

IV

Three years passed. Mukundan was studying diligently in his school. He stood first in the final examination. When this was announced at school one morning, Mukundan was eager to go home and convey the news to his mother at once. But his school-friends invited him to join them on a trip up the temple hill. "Come on, let's go up the hill and have a look at the festival and return after seeing the fun," they said. "If we go up the hill, it will be late when we get back and mother will be waiting for me," he said. "Don't be so silly. You are not a girl. If it gets late, I'll take you home. Don't worry. And don't be proud just because you were first in the exam. You must come with us," insisted a big boy, who was a bit of a bully. "You must come, you must come," cried all the boys around him. Mukundan was a favourite with them all.

So, Munkundan had to agree. It was a gay scene. Crowds were on their way to the festival. The boys thoroughly enjoyed it. They went in and out of the temple and roamed about the bazaar to their hearts' content. One of them was the coddled son of a rich man. His father had given him five rupees to spend as he liked on that festival day. They went into a sweetmeat shop and bought a large amount and all of them shared it. They wandered about in the sun all day. In the evening they went down to return home. When they were half-way down, Mukundan cried, "Ramakrishna, I am feeling awfully thirsty." "Where can we get water here? You must wait till we get home," said the other boys.

"Fools! Don't you know there is Hanuman's pool here?" said the big boy-leader. He led them along a footpath and going behind a huge rock on which the monkey god was chiselled, showed them a pool. Munkundan climbed down and drank eagerly. He came up saying, "How sweet the water is!" When one is very thirsty, even dirty water becomes very sweet.

It was very dark when they reached Kamalapuram. By the time Mukundan knocked at the door of his house and shouted, "Mother," it was very late in the night. "Mukunda, my boy, why are you so late? I was quite worried. You said you'd be back as soon as you learnt the result of the examination," said his mother.

"We've all been to the temple hill. I told them I wouldn't go, but they wouldn't leave me. We saw the festival. It was a grand sight."

"Oh well, I'm glad you have returned safely. Have you passed?" his mother asked anxiously.

"I came first," said the boy.

"Darling! How wonderful! I'm so proud." She hugged him and wept. There was all the pathos of a woman who had lost her husband and brought up a son with such affection and care.

It was hardly four days since Mukundan's mother received the news that swelled her heart with joy and pride. Yet, alas! such

V

is this world. The house had suddenly become desolate. The night on which Mukundan returned home he had severe pain in his stomach and developed diarrhoea. Nobody knew it was cholera. They put it down to indigestion caused by eating sweets bought in the festival-stall. The boy was in great pain. When a case of cholera or any other infectious disease occurs in a poor villager's house, there is nobody who knows what should be done to stop it or to prevent it from spreading. Even if there were, there is neither money nor means to do it. There are learned men to say that this or that should be done. There are books too about it. But none of the things so said or written can be followed in our wretched villages.

Mukundan escaped somehow by a miracle, as it seemed. Some of the neighbours had helped them. But though the son escaped, the mother caught the infection. She concealed her illness for two days and continued to tend her boy. When she could no longer do anything, she lay down. "Alas, I do not know if my boy is out of danger. Who will look after him? I am dying," she cried in anguish and sat up. Then she fell down again unconscious. She did not come to her senses again. A little spasm of the legs and arms; then she passed away.

VI

Another fifteen years went by. Everything was changed. All Brahmin houses in Velampatti were in ruins. Only Krishnabhat, who was the temple priest, remained in his house. The rest had left the village in search of employment in towns. The Velampatti pariah street was also deserted. Some had gone to Kandy, some to Penang, some to the Sheveroy hills, to Bangalore and other places, in search of wage-work. Only the peasants' quarters were not quite so deserted. Unable to leave their farms and cattle, they still stayed behind despite great difficulties.

Mari and Chinnan were with their mother in Ceylon on a tea plantation. Their father soon began to frequent the toddy shop again. He did not do his work properly. He was declared

a lazy drunkard and turned out in a few days. He joined another tea-garden, but he met the same fate there. He wandered from place to place and begged and continued to drink. After a time he disappeared. No one knew what had happened to him.

Mari and Chinnan worked in the plantations and led a thrifty life. Mari was now twenty-five years old. There was a girl who was born and bred in the workmen's lines in the same plantation. His mother said to him, "You cannot get a better girl than this in your village. Marry this girl." Mari yielded to her wishes. Some days after the marriage he thought of going back home to his village and settling down there.

"Mother, we have lived here fifteen years. Father has not turned up yet. There is no use waiting for him. What prevents us from going back to our village? We have about two hundred rupees with the Kangani. We will take it and go back to Velampatti, buy a pair of bulls and a cart and live honourably. Mother, I do not like this place at all. We slave here and are penned up like cattle. This is a god-forsaken place. One's wife is not one's own. Why should we stay here any longer?" he said to his mother.

"Yes, my son. I also want to go back to Velampatti and die in your father's hut," said Kuppayee.

So they all returned to Velampatti. Mari and Chinnan went to Melacheri fair and bought a pair of bullocks. Then they went to Salem and purchased a cart there and returned. Mari led a happy life. The farmers looked upon him with envy. "Look at the Kandy pariah. He has got a cart and bullocks and is quite prosperous now."

But this did not last long. Misfortune came. One of the bulls became lame all of a sudden for no conceivable reason. It did not recover in spite of the best care. He gave five rupees to an animal physician in Kondalampatti who first applied drugs to the bullock's foot, then tried spells and resorted finally to branding. But nothing helped. The bullock died. Mari pawned his cart to a farmer and borrowed forty rupees from him.

With this and some more money he had saved, he brought another bull. So he managed for some time.

Suddenly there appeared in the villages round about an epidemic of cattle disease. Scores of cattle died. Mari's new bull caught the disease and died the same day.

The brothers hired themselves out to work under a farmer for daily wages. Their master exacted labour from them day and night. The wages were very low. They lived on insufficient food themselves and they found it difficult to maintain their aged and feeble mother. In addition to this, Chinnan began to quarrel with Mari. Meanwhile, an agent recruiting labour for Penang came. Chinnan went away with him without telling his brother. When he reached Negapatam, he got someone to write a letter for him to his elder brother. "I have committed a great sin in leaving without informing you, my brother. I did so because I thought I could escape starvation, which became unbearable. and earn a living outside. I beg to be forgiven. I mentally fall before the feet of my mother and my elder brother from here and tender my reverential regards," said the letter. Of course, no one imagined that Chinnan could write all this. It was all the handiwork of the man whom he got to write for him. But it was very creditable of him to have spent two annas and asked someone to write respectfully to his brother. What more can a poor illiterate man do?

Old Kuppayee wept incessantly. "Alas! all this is due to your having gone near the Brahmin lady's kitchen. That curse is still there. Oh! Goddess Mariayee, when will your anger soften? When will this misery end? We have not even got a pie. If I had money, I would give you a fowl as a sacrifice in the coming festival. Oh! mother of Velampatti. Let me die and end my troubles. But keep my son alive and bless him. Let him and his wife live happily," she would mutter to herself.

Though only fifteen years old, Mari's wife, Poovayee, was a very smart and diligent girl. She would go alone bravely to the jungle, gather firewood and bring it home. She was never idle

for a minute. When the household work was finished and she was free, she would cut grass or beg for work somewhere and bring home the wages so earned. Wherever she sold grass or firewood, she was always paid a little more than others. She would thus make a two-anna piece at least on two or three days in every week and give it to her husband with a smiling face.

Not a drop of rain that year. They had had insufficient rain for four years past. But that year saw the worst drought. All the wells went dry. There was not a blade of green grass. There was hardly any water to drink. Many more people left the already dilapidated village.

Mari also thought of leaving to seek a livelihood somewhere else. But his mother said, "Let us die here. What does it matter where we are? The same God will protect us here also," and refused to leave. Mari said nothing being unwilling to go against his aged mother's wishes.

There remained now only five inhabited houses in the pariah street of the village, The others had already been left desolate by their owners. The pond from which the pariahs took their drinking water had been dry for a long time. There was Kuttikoundan's land adjoining it in which there was a well which held some water. Kuttikoundan kept a part of his crop alive by watering it from that well. After he paled out water for his field and untied his bulls and washed them, the pariahs or "untouchables" were permitted to take water from the channel flowing to the field. But they were not allowed to lower their pots into the well. That would be pollution. That is why they took the water from the channel. Other farmers would not show them even this kindness. Water was a precious article in Velampatti, because it was so scarce, and no wonder the farmers did not want even a drop to be diverted from their crops. But this farmer was a kindly man. He said, "The poor pariahs are dying for want of drinking water," and allowed them to take water from the channel.

The women used to wait there from the morning. They

fought among themselves as to who should fill her pot first. The amount of water that stayed in the pits dug in the shallow channel was very small. On some days all the water became muddy as they fought for it. "Sir, look at this woman. She has stirred up all the mud," one of them would complain to the farmer about some other woman. The farmers who stood looking at the tragic fun would remark, "These foolish pariahs are always like this." Then the women would fill their pots with the muddy water and depart. The water would clear after some time in the pots, and then they could drink it.

VII

Kutti Koundan was sleeping, as usual, in the shed in his farm along with his two sons. There was no crop to watch. But there were four bullocks and four or five goats that were mere skeletons, having been underfed for a long time. There was also the rope and the leather bucket. In days of famine, people will steal anything they can get. So it was the practice for somebody to sleep in the farmshed at night.

The full moon was overhead. The bare fields shone in the moonlight with a beautiful milky whiteness. Famine showed itself in its cruel reality during the day time. At night everything was tired and asleep. Even famine seemed to sleep at night. Considering man's miseries here on earth, his ability to forget everything in sleep even for a short while is a great boon.

A dog's bark was heard breaking the dead stillness of midnight. Other dogs followed. "Who is there? Thief!" shouted Kutti Koundan's younger son and sat up. It appeared that someone was trying to escape with the leather bucket walking stealthily in the shadow of the yellow-flower tree on the bank of the well.

"Up! Up! Brother! The thief is running away with our leather bucket." Sengodan got up, rubbed his eyes and, shouting for his uncle and others in the neighbourhood, ran in the direction of the intruder.

By this time all the dogs were barking loudly and there was

a great noise. People all about were yelling, "Thief in the farm, catch him! catch him!" Men from neighbouring sheds ran up to the place. The thief was caught at last. It was a woman. She had a rope and a mud pot in her hands, both her own. What she stole was only water! She had let her pot into the well and was drawing water from it. "A pariah woman has let her pot into our well," they shouted from all sides, and then followed cries of "beat her," "kick her," "kill her," "break her pot," and so on. Her pot was soon smashed to pieces and she was beaten and kicked till she was on the ground senseless.

"She is dead. Don't beat her now," said Rakia Koundan.

"Dig a pit and bury the dog there," said another.

"Yes. We shall be rid of a great bother," said still another.

When they talked of digging a pit and burying her, the men grew calmer. One cannot go on beating for ever. They knew there was an end to it.

"Who is this? See. Does anyone know her?" asked an old man.

"It is Kandy Mari's wife. Pity! She was a good woman. Why did she do this?" asked the elder son of Kutti Koundan.

"Yesterday, I turned them all out, saying there was no water. That is why she has done this," said the younger son.

"Who cares for caste or religion in these days of famine? Everything has gone wrong and orderless. There is no distinguishing good from bad," said a tall farmer looking at the woman on the ground.

"Lo! She is not dead! She was only pretending. Kick her! Then she will get up and run home," said another and followed his words with a couple of kicks. Others tried the same treatment. Only a slight movement was observed. She did not get up or speak.

"Fellows, you take up this dog and get rid of the carcass in the *cheri,*" said Rakia Koundan. He had some experience. He had watched a trial in the sessions court. He knew the difficulties attending murder.

Following his advice, three or four men lifted the woman and went towards the pariah quarters.

If the history of helpless orphans were written with true details, it would be of use to all. Though we may be no orphans, yet we can learn many things from their experience and benefit by them. Mukundan's experiences were of the same nature. Since his mother died, and left him entirely helpless, his wanderings and his struggle for existence would make a long Mahabharata. He did not write down his experiences, and giving it second-hand would be a tasteless affair.

Though orphans may not have any other advantage, they generally have the benefit of much travelling. Geography they learn by personal experience. Mukundan wandered all over India, suffered much and somehow finally got on well. He passed his medical examination, served as a doctor in one or two places and then came to his own as the hospital doctor.

In the hospital at Kamalapuram, he was checking the accounts of the hospital and looking over the stock books lying on the table in front of him, to prepare the periodical returns. Four men came into the compound, carrying a coir cot which they placed on the ground outside, and cried "Master," in that manner pariahs have of drawing out their vowels. He said to his compounder, "They appear to be pariahs. I suppose it is a murder. Please go and see."

VIII

The head master of the local school was sitting near him. He used to take a walk in the morning every day, chat with the hospital doctor for half an hour and then go away.

"Not a week passes in this place without a murder and a post-mortem examination. This seems to be a bad place. It was not so bad in the other hospitals in which I worked," said Mukundan.

"They are all illiterate people here. People in this district will fight over the most trivial things. A heated conversation often

ends in blows and murder. With the spread of elementary education all these troubles will disappear," said the headmaster.

The compounder then returned and said, "It is not a dead body. Some woman has been beaten severely and has been brought on a cot."

"What is her age?" asked the head master. Mukundan without heeding this question, said, "Ask them to bring her in and lay her on the table."

The head master said, "It is some clandestine love affair that has led to this catastrophe," and stood up to go.

"Quite possible. Let us go and see," said Mukundan and went to the table. The men who had brought the woman lifted her gently from the cot and laid her on the table.

Mukundan, examining the injuries, said, "They have beaten her severely," and after close inspection found that two bones in her arms were broken. The others were superficial skin wounds.

One of those who had brought her was Mari. "Master, will she live?" he asked.

"Is she related to you?" Mukundan asked.

"Sir, she is my wife. Will she survive?" again he demanded, his eyes filling with tears.

"She will be all right; don't you worry. She must be kept here for a month," said Mukundan.

On hearing this, Mari cried, "Alas, what shall I do for food?"

"You fool! We shall give the food and look after her," said Mukundan. One among them then said, "Mari, don't you know? It is our old master's son, our margosa-tree house master's son. He will protect us surely. He will cure her."

Another said, "He will give her food and make her all right. He will feed you also. Why do you weep?"

They all cried together, "Our master will save us."

"Yes! Yes!" said Mukundan continuing to examine the broken hands of the injured woman.

"I shall go, doctor," said the head master, saluting him.

"All right, Namaskar," he said to him, and, turning to Mari, asked, "What was the quarrel about? How did she come by these injuries? Tell me, good brother."

They told him what had happened. As they spoke all together at a time, it was a bit difficult for Mukundan to follow the details.

IX

"Muthu Pillai, have you kept any flowers here?" asked Dr. Mukundan.

"No, sir. Where can we get flowers? All the plants are withered," said the compounder.

"Very funny!" said Mukundan to himself. "When I go near that woman, I feel the smell of jasmine. It smells like those that my mother was so fond of collecting." Thus thinking of his dead mother, he gently applied medicine to Poovayee's wounds. Then he made splints for the broken bones and bandaged them.

"How do you feel?" he asked her.

She sighed and said, "Now it is a little less painful, my master. May God give you all prosperity. May He keep you always happy."

When these words came out of her mouth, her look and her smile were those of a woman fondling her child and drinking the nectar of maternal happiness. Mukundan's mind was filled more and more with the memory of his mother.

"I do not know why. Whenever I go near this woman, I cannot help thinking of my mother." So saying to himself, he went to wash his hands. Wherever he went then, it was flooded with the perfume of jasmine, so he felt. Though, after her husband's death, she could not wear flowers herself, she used daily to gather jasmine flowers somewhere and offer them to her deity. The

fragrance used to fill the whole house. Now Mukundan felt that same fragrance once again.

It is a common experience of many to remember without any obvious reason the air of some song or some particular perfume and recollect some incident of their childhood along with it. Sometimes, they can only feel that a tune or perfume was once heard or smelt, but cannot define when or where it had happened. This is said by some to be recollections of a former life. The memory of the happy days he spent with his mother in the Velampatti house, when he was a child, came like a flood upon him that day.

"How mysterious! This perfume will not leave me. They say the dead are born again. Probably my mother is reborn in this woman. Who can say no?" he thought and again went near the cot where she was lying. She opened her eyes and looked at him. That look reminded him of his mother again, and once more he felt the strong perfume of the jasmine, coming with a gust upon him.

X

Mukundan always fell asleep as soon as he went to bed. He had learnt the way of doing this from some yogi in the North when he was wandering there. It is nearly everybody's experience to lie down and keep awake thinking endlessly of all kinds of things. Mukundan had trained himself to drive away such thoughts, control his mind and fall asleep as he lay down. But today, the trick failed him. Try as he could, no sleep would come. After tossing about in his bed for a time, he got up, lit the lamp and began reading a book. It was a copy of the *Bhagavad Gita* that a friend of his had given him. His eyes fell on the twenty-second verse of the second chapter.

Mukundan's mind went to his mother. "Yes: but what kind of body will dead people's souls enter? Can a soul enter any body that it likes? No; that is not possible. It depends on the good and evil, the help and the hindrance that one has done in one's previous life. We often find a man or animal in trouble. The soul

of our mother or father or brother or lamented friend, who died leaving us in a sea of sorrow, might be inhabiting that body. Therefore, we should be kind to every man or animal that is in distress and try to give support or relief to it. We often envy people who are prosperous or happy. How foolish! Perhaps someone dear to us, who had met an untimely death, has taken birth again in that body and by virtue of good deeds done in the past is now enjoying power and wealth. How absurd to be envious."

Mukundan had read the same stanza many times before this. The lines of poetry or song that we read sometimes suddenly assume a clearness and convey a meaning they never had before. These lines of the *Gita* brought to Mukundan that day something fresh and new.

"The body dies worn out with age or disease. But the soul that has neither age nor sickness cannot die with it. Though my mother's body is gone, her soul must have been re-born in some other body," he thought and continued to read.

XI

"Mukunda, my boy, get up. Come and have your meal," his mother called from the kitchen. It was her voice, no doubt! But, how wonderful! I have been thinking all along that she had died. Here is her own voice. It is she. All my wanderings about from place to place and all my sufferings were nothing but dreams. My mother is not dead. She is living. It is now time to go to school. I will never touch dirty water again. Even if I get cholera, I will not permit her to come near me. I will not let her catch the infection. Oh! what joy is this! Here is my mother alive and well. Mother! Come near.

She is hurrying away somewhere, carrying a pot. She seems to be beckoning to me to follow her. Stop! Mother, stop! Why are you running? Look, she is entering the *cheri*! They have all surrounded her, and are beating her. "Have you entered the *cheri*? What business has a Brahmin woman here?" they cry and like wild beasts fall upon her and beat her with sticks breaking

her bones. They lay her down on a cot and bring her to the hospital. Alas! my poor mother. She is lying sick with cholera. She has unbearable pains in her body. She has cramps in her hands and feet, has a violent pain in her stomach. Oh! they are carrying my mother, saying, "She is gone." Alas! I am not able to get up and stop them. Is she dead? Is she gone? What shall I do?

Mukundan woke up, startled by his own dream. As he had gone to sleep sitting in the chair, his *Bhagavad Gita* lay on the ground where it fell from his hands. So, he was again in the Kamalapuram Hospital; the rest was all a dream. He got up from the chair and went and laid himself on his bed and was soon fast asleep.

XII

Mukundan dressed her wounds with great care and affection. It took more than a month to get them healed, and for her bones to set.

"Brother, Mari, I shall ask you one thing. Will you do it?" said Mukundan.

"Tell me, master," said Mari.

"When I was a small boy, you saved me from death at the monkey's hands; and in return my mother beat you and turned you out of the house. Is it not so?"

"Oh! It happened long ago. You have saved my wife and have put sunshine into my life."

"Mari, you know that dead men are born again, to experience the fruits of the good or evil they did in their former life."

"Yes, sir, they say so. God's eyes see everything. He won't leave anyone unpunished. There is none above Him."

"My mother did you a great wrong. I believe she has been re-born and is suffering for her sins. I want to do a penance for it," said Mukundan.

Mari said, "Sir, I don't understand your words."

"You are now in the throes of a severe famine. You are all suffering terribly. You and your wife can stay in my house. I have no relatives. You and Poovayee can remain here as my brother and sister," Mukundan said.

Mari did not really understand. "How can that be? It is impossible, sir."

Mukundan said, "Mari, it is a sin to let you people lead this miserable life. I want to undergo this penance for that also. You should not refuse."

"Oh! master," mechanically said the dazed pariah.

"I told you there is birth after death. From the time I saw your wife, I do not know why, I think she is my mother."

"Sir, I do not understand anything that you say."

"Brother, it does not matter if you do not understand. You should not refuse what I ask. You must stay with me."

"My mother will not consent."

"I will persuade her," said Mukundan.

"If she agrees, it will be all right," said Mari.

Mukundan somehow persuaded Kuppayee. From that time Mukundan became a pariah to the people of the place. But his mind found peace.

SABESAN'S COFFEE

At one time Sabesan's Coffee was famous throughout the country. Even white men fancied it. There is no need, therefore, to describe its popularity among our own people. Ladies in the higher circles of Madras society maintained that coffee powder made at home, however well selected the seeds or careful the roasting might be, could not compare with Sabesan's tinned coffee.

Sabesan began his coffee trade in the year 1925. For two years his life was seldom free from trouble, but in 1928 Subbu Kutti joined Sabesan as his clerk. From that moment Sabesan's fortune rose. Within six months his business increased three-fold and continued doing so rapidly thereafter. Even Sabesan was surprised. He thought that Subbu Kutti had brought the luck with him, and treated him with great affection. He gave him every help, without his asking for it. He arranged for Subbu Kutti's sister to marry into a good and wealthy family, and met all the expenses of the marriage himself. He looked upon Subbu Kutti as a partner, not as a mere clerk.

Subbu Kutti's mother had taught him a secret process of grinding, which gave coffee so prepared a special flavour. When Subbu Kutti joined Sabesan's firm as a clerk, Sabesan happened to taste a cup of coffee made in Subbu Kutti's house. "I have never tasted such good coffee anywhere else," said he. He plied Subbu Kutti's mother with questions. "Is it a special method of roasting? Or, is it the grade of seed? Is it expertness in filtering?", and so on. Offering no explanation she simply said, "Ask Subbu Kutti for the secret." "Can whatever it is be done for our company during grinding?" asked he. "Yes, certainly," said Subbu Kutti's mother.

After that, Sabesan asked Subbu Kutti to go to the mill whenever the seeds were ground. There he did something un-

observed by anyone else, so that even Sabesan did not know the secret. It was known only that Subbu Kutti brought something from his house in a small tin and mixed it with the seeds while they were being ground. It was privately agreed upon between them that Sabesan should ask no questions about it.

The business grew apace and showed a great profit. Sabesan was considered one of the "merchant princes" of Madras. He was elected a member of several merchants' chambers and gentlemen's clubs.

Sabesan tried sometimes to find out the secret; but Subbu Kutti's mother had extorted a vow from him that he would tell no one, not even Sabesan. Sabesan did not press the matter further.

In 1936 Sabesan's net profit was twenty-four thousand rupees. Subbu Kutti's salary was two hundred and fifty rupees a month. Subbu Kutti used to go home every day in Sabesan's motor car so that friends who had showed great affection for Subbu Kutty now began to grow jealous of him. They found defects in him which had not been seen before and tried to sow enmity between Sabesan and Subbu Kutti. They did not succeed; on the contrary, their mutual trust and affection increased.

Two years passed like this. One day Sabesan was talking to a timber-merchant.

"Your business is getting on well. But I hear your manager Subbu Kutti Iyer is starting an independent coffee business of his own," said the timber-merchant.

"There is no proposal of that kind. Who told you?" asked Sabesan.

"He himself was talking about it to some people, I know," said Jayaram Nadar, the timber-merchant.

"I'm sure you're wrong, or he would have told me about it," said Sabesan.

"This is no mere rumour, I assure you. You're bound to hear about it yourself."

Shortly afterwards another friend told Sabesan that Subbu Kutti had been heard asking the banker Visvanath about coffee-grinding machines. Sabesan's suspicions were confirmed. "The progress of the business and my own credit and position are all in Subbu Kutti's hands. The secret of the coffee powder is also his. What can I do about it?" thought Sabesan. Then began a hatred and anger against Subbu Kutti which went on increasing. He began to think that all his servants looked upon Subbu Kutti as their master and did not show sufficient regard for himself. Sabesan the proprietor grew jealous of Subbu Kutti the clerk.

"Look here, Subbu Kutti, if there is anything to be reported, the workers should tell me and not appeal to you. I cannot accept your recommendations in such matters." This was about a servant's grievance.

This sort of thing happened on several occasions.

One day Subbu Kutti said to Sabesan, "I am thinking of taking leave for a month. Appusamy Ayyar has invited me to stay with him at Tiruvarur. Kindly give me leave."

"No," said Sabesan.

Subbu Kutti did not understand this. One who had been so kind to him hitherto, now without any reason behaved curtly and rudely. Thinking that it was due to an ill-star, he went on doing his job as well as before but he had lost his peace of mind. Then his health began to fail. Medicine did him no good. Doctors insisted that he should take two months' rest. Sabesan declared that unless he was told the secret in the making of the coffee powder, he was not prepared to grant leave.

"My son, resign. We have been lucky so far. When our luck returns we shall start our own business in a small way. Let God's will be done," said his mother and enjoined him not to disclose the secret to Sabesan. Sabesan accepted Subbu Kutti's resignation and removed him from his job.

For some days Sabesan's business did not suffer by this turn of events. The beauty of the figure of Nataraja on the tin, the natural properties of all coffee, and Sabesan's old reputation sustained the trade. Then began a change. Someone would remark, "The coffee seems to be below quality today."

"Something wrong with the filtering cloth. The tin was open and the coffee must have lost its flavour," suggested the people in the house.

"Subbu is doing all this propaganda against his old master. The coffee cannot have become worse simply because a clerk was dismissed," said Sabesan's friends.

Other customers began to buy coffee-seeds to roast in their own houses saying, "There is nothing to compare with home-made coffee." In short, within five or six months of the dismissal of Subbu Kutti, Sabesan's business began to fail.

Subbu Kutti's banker friend Viswanath asked him to go into partnership with him. He could take half the profits, all capital would be furnished by himself, the banker said. Subbu Kutti waited for one or two months hoping that Sabesan would call him back. Then he agreed to Viswanath's scheme and began work.

Subbu Kutti's gentle spirit was now lifted up. He was seized with the idea of teaching a lesson to Sabesan. Subbu Kutti gave the name "Natesan's Coffee" to his product which rhymed with "Sabesan." The secret ingredient was increased one and a half times. In the picture of Nataraja printed on the label the leg pose was reversed. The new coffee was put on the market. Diligent agents were employed. Sales progressed quickly. Viswanath spent large sums of money and advertised freely. He fed Subbu Kutti's enthusiasm and kept up his resentment by all sorts of devices.

Sabesan filed a suit in the High Court, alleging that the shape, name and label were all much like those of his own, that the buying public was misled and he had consequently lost his business. The litigation for injunction and damages went on for one year. In the end Sabesan won.

On the day when the Court gave judgment, Sabesan had high fever. Overwhelmed with joy on hearing the decree, the sick man got up from his bed, got into his car and the chauffeur being absent, himself drove to his lawyer's house. He gave orders for steps to be taken for the immediate attachment and sale of goods in Subbu Kutti's firm. He arranged for special offerings in the great temple of Chidambaram.

Subbu Kutti's mother was drowned in sorrow as if the world were flooded. "Oh God, will you not punish this Sabesan? Will you not see that he pays for the wrong he has done my son?" So she prayed to her favourite deity. As if in answer to her prayer, on the eighth day after the judgment in the suit, contrary to the expectation of his doctors, Sabesan died of heart-failure.

The decree of the High Court lost its life when Sabesan passed away. Viswanath's lawyers, explaining the law, advised him that his firm could now sell their coffee without any let or hindrance. If the figure of Nataraja was replaced by Krishna dancing on the Kalanga snake, all possible objections would be removed, they said. Sabesan's ghost was protesting in the air, "Alas! The decree passed in my favour has come to nothing!" Such is the persistence of hatred and ill-will.

"There is no good grieving," said a saint's spirit and sang:
"He told his wife, 'I want a good meal,'
She served and he ate with much relish;
He retired to bed with his beloved;
'There is some little pain on my left side!' said he.
He said this: and lay in his bed.
But he lay there for ever, for he was dead, dead!"
So sang the voice of the saint.

This lawyer's opinion restored Viswanath's and Kutti's spirits. They felt as if they had reconquered the world; but the secret of the coffee powder had somehow leaked out.

All the town began to remark, "This coffee powder is a soap-nut adulteration." Others said, "A quarter of the stuff in the tin is soap-nut powder." Then both Sabesan's Coffee and Natesan's

Coffee ceased to please the public. The people who drank coffee made from either of the tinned powders sensed disorders in their systems. Some developed constipation, others loose bowels. Some even began to vomit after drinking it. So much so that all the big people began to roast their own coffee. Actually, Subbu Kutti mixed with his coffee powdered soap-nut in the proportion of just a tea-spoon to a whole tin. The very people who had been drinking it and enjoying it before, found it intolerably bad now.

CAN ASTROLOGY ERR?

Mr Swaminathayyar had been headmaster of the Tondamandalam High School for the last twelve years. He and his wife Akilandamma were very happily married, but Akilandamma had one great cause of grief: she had no child.

"What does it matter, Akila? There are two hundred boys in the school. They are all my children," he would say.

"It may not matter to you. You can call them all your children, but I'm alone in the house all day! A woman's lot is hard when she has no child of her own," his wife would reply.

Since his wife's longing for a child grew as time went on, Swaminathayyar decided on a pilgrimage. He obtained leave for two months and after visiting holy places like Palani and Rameshwaram in the South, he went to Mysore, where he piously went round one or two Aswattha trees famous for blessing childless wives with progeny. Then he returned home. As foretold by a Telugu astrologer who had cast her horoscope, Akilandamma became pregnant in due course.

"Astrology cannot err," said Swaminathayyar in joy. Akilandamma said it was all due to her devoted worship of the Aswattha trees. Whatever it might be, they decided that when the child was born they should once again go to Palani. They spent their time guessing when the happy event was likely to be.

Some of Swaminatha's friends advised him that as conception had taken place many years after marriage, special care ought to be taken of his wife. They recommended getting her admitted into the Egmore Maternity Hospital. Akilandamma's mother had died long ago and an aunt was their only female relative still living. For some reason she could not come to look after Akilandamma as they had expected. They decided that Akilandamma should go to hospital rather than be delivered at home.

The delivery took place without any trouble. Swaminatha's happiness need not be described. He thought of giving large presents to the hospital staff.

The baby was born at nine o'clock at night. As usual a nurse bathed the baby at once and took him away to a separate office to record his weight. Three babies were born that day at about the same time. The nurses were as enthusiastic and excited as if they themselves were the mothers.

They went through the usual routine with these three children. They took the usual precaution against a mix-up by tying a number-card to each baby's hip.

Of the three babies one was dark-skinned, while the other two were fair and of nearly the same colour and weight.

The nurse that had brought Akilandamma's baby left it in charge of the other nurses and went away. It was usual to attach the baby's number-card as soon as a baby was brought in, but, as the nurses were gossiping, they forgot to do it and were then in doubt as to which was Akilandamma's baby. There was no question about the black baby. They came to their own conclusion about the other two babies and tied on the numbers. Akilandamma's baby was just a shade fairer. The Muslim lady lying in the eighth ward was dark-skinned and they decided that her child must be the darker one. They took the baby that was a shade fairer and laid it beside Akilandamma. There was no trouble.

"How pretty your child is! It weighs seven pounds. Is this your first baby?" the nurse asked. She was a Frenchwoman.

"Yes," said Swaminathayyar. The mother lay in bed exhausted. Her inner joy was expressed in a beautiful smile. There was no limit to her happiness now. Her life had now been blessed with a child and filled with a purpose.

"Is the child healthy and robust?" the father asked. Fathers are always businesslike and scientific.

"This is the best of the three babies born today," said the nurse in English.

Swaminatha interpreted this to Akilandamma in Tamil.

Meantime, the nurse who had first taken the baby entered the ward. She picked up the baby and played with it for some time and then both nurses went out.

"This baby had a mole near its navel. How has it disappeared so quickly?" asked the first nurse.

"Was that this lady's child? We've sent it to Ward No. 8. We tied the Muslim child's number on to it," said the second nurse.

"Good heavens! Well, we better keep quiet about it now," said the first.

The second nurse protested. "That would be very wrong. If you are sure, let's change the babies now and correct the mistake."

"You're mad," the first nurse said. "If we do that, there'll be trouble. We shall lose our jobs. There will still be doubt and both mothers will be unhappy and troubled. It is best to keep quiet."

Twelve days later, Abdul Tyabji's wife went to her house in Anderson Street and Akilandamma to her house in Triplicane. Both babies were brought up with great care in their respective houses. There was great wealth and comfort in Tyabji Seth's; but boundless love and contentment in Swaminathayyar's. There was not the slightest difference in the care and thought bestowed on the two infants.

When Swaminatha's child was a year old, his aunt came on a visit. "The child's eyes are exactly like our brother Muttuswamy's," she said. "Only her nose looks like that of Swaminatha's people." Mr Ayyar was fairly satisfied with that. The mother was happy on both counts.

It was the same in Seth Tyabji's house. Now, twenty-two years

after Seth Tyabji's death, his son, Suleiman, clever from his very birth, conducts with great efficiency the great import business that his father left him.

Swaminathayyar's son Aswatha Narayan could not get beyond his S.S.L.C., however much he tried. He went to Bombay, stayed there with friends for some time, seeking recommendations and trying for jobs, but returned without getting any. All this weighed on Swaminathayyar's mind. The note the astrologer had given him had said, "Your son will become a great merchant. He will be lucky; but he will be quite useless to his parents."

"It matters little if he is of any use or not to you or me. It is enough if he be happy. But look at his failures. Astrology is all bunkum," said Swaminathayyar bitterly.

"How can you say that it is false? Was not the child born just as foretold? God's writing cannot go wrong. Who knows what may yet come or not come? Put him under a Chettiar. He may perhaps turn out to be clever in trade," said Akilandamma.

REPENTANCE

After spending many sleepless nights in the garden of Asoka trees, one day poor Sita, before she knew it, was fast asleep.

During her miserable imprisonment in the Asoka gardens, she had often thought of Lakshmana. Even while she was thinking of Rama, it would often appear to her as if Lakshmana stood before her and spoke wordlessly, by his looks and by the tears in his eyes, "Sister! How could you speak to me in that way?" She could not bear it. It grieved her more than her internment. "Alas! I wounded his innocent heart by speaking unutterable words to him. More grievous is my sin than that of Ravana, who has carried me here," she would think and reproach herself again and again for her thoughtlessness.

Worn out by such thoughts, she fell asleep, and in a dream saw Lakshmana standing before her in the garden. She was overjoyed at finding him there.

"Oh! So you've come at last, brother? Have all my sufferings here been only a dream?" she said, shedding tears of joy.

"I have indeed come, sister. There is no more to fear, no more cause for sorrow. I ought never to have left you alone, Will you forgive me?" asked Lakshmana.

Then laughing, he added, "How obstinate you were! What awful danger it brought us into!"

Lakshmana's laughter had the effect of sunshine on the morning dew. How can one describe in writing the beauty of that laughter blended with sorrow, tears and gladness.

"Yes, I was wrong-headed. But was it right of you to have left me alone like that? How could you break your vow to your elder brother, however harshly I might have spoken to you? I lost my temper and spoke unspeakable words. But you ought not, on

that account, to have broken the pledge you made to your brother," said Sita.

"What pledge? What vow have you ever made to Rama? I have heard nothing of it," said the sage Narada, who somehow happened to be there. This was his way. And that is the way of dreams.

"Did he not promise? How can one as venerable as you speak in this manner?" said Sita. Apparently Sita, the mother of the Universe, did not dread Narada.

Narada replied: "When, at your request, Rama told his brother to stay where he was and ran after the deer in great haste, he did not wait to hear what his brother said. Lakshmana did not make any promise by word of mouth."

Lakshmana laughed on hearing this. "I do not like arguments of this sort. Perhaps among Rishis such quibbles are permissible. I am a soldier. When Rama said, 'Stay here,' and I stood at the door of the hut, it was tantamount to a promise on my part," said Lakshmana.

"My husband went away entrusting me to this brother of his," said Sita.

"If you two are so easily agreed over the question, why should I dispute it? After all, it is your business," said Narada.

"If I used harsh language, what harm could it do to you?" said Sita. "We left city and palace just to keep a vow. We refused the request of Bharata and the people because we hold that a promise once made should be kept at all costs."

"Do not wound my heart by reminding me of the unbearable things you said," said Lakshmana.

"Even if the whole world slandered you, was it right on your part to have gone away and left me?" said Sita.

"You are right, Sita, I know. After I had left you and walked half the distance, I began to think as you do. 'What can my sister-in-law's abuse do to me? My promise to my brother alone

counts,' I said to myself, and I turned round and took ten steps back."

Then, Ravana, disguised as an ascetic and eating the fruit that Sita had placed before him, suddenly shook with fear. This was when Lakshmana turned back. He had evil omens. His left eye and left arm throbbed. He put down the fruit on the leaf and looked at the gate. He was afraid that Lakshmana might arrive at any moment and thought he might have to run away.

"Fear not," said Narada to the Rakshasa.

This mischief-making Rishi arrived from somewhere, somehow, and immediately involved himself in the affair.

The story appears to be strange, erratic and disconnected. Where was the Asoka garden and where was Panchavati? Do not cavil at this. It was but a dream and an unhappy woman's dream. There is neither rule nor reason in such dreams.

"I took ten steps back towards the hermitage. But your angry red eyes and frowning brows came to my mind. 'Ah! wretched man, have you returned?', you seemed to say; and you hissed and sprang upon me like the angry goddess Kali. I turned back. The vow I had made to my brother was forgotten. Your words and my pride alone remained and confounded my mind. 'Come what may! I shall save my honour,' I said, and grinding my teeth followed the deer's cries."

"Alas!" cried Sita. "If you had returned then, I should have been saved."

"What is past is past. Get up. Let us go now. Why think of past misfortune when I am here?" said Lakshmana.

"Brother, brother," said Sita in great remorse, "what grave injustice I have committed. Is there no penance by which I can atone for it?"

"Get up. Get up," said Lakshmana and shook her awake!

Sita got up. There was neither Lakshmana nor Narada there. She saw only female demons all around her. One of them said,

"Get up. Get up. Why are you still sleeping when the great Ravana is coming. Hear the trumpets sound. Do as the King tells you and don't be obstinate. Rama and Lakshmana are on the other side of the great ocean, and can never reach you here. You are Ravana's wife. Accept him gratefully. Why reject the fortune and happiness that seek you and waste your life in foolish opposition?"

"Alas!" cried Sita. And the trees and the shrubs sighed with her.

It was on the next day that Hanuman jumped the ocean and actually reached Lanka. Sita's dream was only the forerunner of Hanuman's arrival. She had dreamt of what was actually to happen. As she did not know Hanuman, she saw Lakshmana in his place.

What happened in the Asoka gardens afterwards, everybody knows. When Sita learnt who Hanuman was, the first question she asked him was "Is Lakshmana well?". It was only after that that she began to enquire about her husband.

The remorse that she felt for having insulted Lakshmana was a painful canker in her heart. The worst sorrows are those that cannot be shared.

If we remember the sorrows and sufferings of Sita, we can forget our own troubles to some extent. It is said that Hanuman is immortal. He is always near, ready to help. When we are in trouble, let us bear it with fortitude, saying "Rama! Rama!" and Hanuman will certainly come to our rescue.

ROYAPPAN

Royappan was one of our sales-boys. He was a Christian lad; but at night his habit was to prostrate himself before a Vinayaka idol and then to lie down and sleep behind it. He would not allow that there was any better place to lie down in.

If anyone asked him, "Why do you go on sleeping in such a place?", he would simply smile. If pressed, he would say, "It gives me peace of mind."

"Was your father a Christian, or, are you a convert?" some people would ask him. "I became one," he would proudly say and set off to sell his papers.

Kandasamy Ayyar was village accountant of Panjapatti in Krishnagiri taluk. One day while his wife was climbing up from the Devil's Pool after washing there, she slipped and fell into the water. "Oh! What will happen to my poor child?" she cried continually before she was drowned. Venkatarayan was then only six months old, but some years later Kandasamy Ayyar married again. For a time things went on well. Then the boy Venkatarayan began to feel that both his father and step-mother disliked him. The dislike grew into unreasoning hatred. His step-mother would beat him, saying that he wantonly disobeyed her and, when he went crying to his father, he too would beat him. All this was incomprehensible to the poor child. If anyone beat a dog or hit it with a stone and he saw it running away howling painfully, fellow-feeling would make him stand looking at the poor animal for a long while. By this time he was seven years old and going to school. But he had no interest in reading. His teachers first threatened, then even beat him a little; finally they left him alone deciding he was a dunce.

One day a school friend, Sourimuttu, took him to his house. His friend's mother, waiting at the gate, embraced and kissed her boy as soon as he arrived, and taking him by his hand went in.

"Who is that with you?" she asked.

"He is my classmate, the village accountant's boy. I brought him to play with me. Can he have something to eat too?"

Everything he saw in Sourimuttu's house seemed wonderful to Venkatarayan. He went home with Souri for two or three days.

"Why is not my mother as kind to me as Souri's mother is to him," he thought. One day he took Souri aside and asked him, "How are mothers made? How did you get your mother?"

But Sourimuttu did not know the answer. He did not understand how children got their mothers. At last he said, "God gives them to us. I don't know why He did not give you a good mother. Perhaps He's angry with you."

When Souri's mother came he said: "Mother, Venkatarayan's mother is always beating him. Why is it? Can't he have a good mother like me?"

Mary smiled and said, "If you are good your mother won't beat you." While doing so she stroked her own boy's face and kissed him on the head.

"When did I get my mother? When did you become Souri's mother?" asked Venkatarayan.

Mary smiled in pity at the boy's ignorance. "Haven't you been told, darling? When you were a baby your mother slipped into the Devil's Pool, and was drowned. Your father married again. I was at the wedding and had *pansupari*. It is not your mother that beats you. She is dead and gone."

"Then where is my mother now?" asked Venkatarayan, his eyes wide open. She said, "Dear child, if you pray to God, your mother will come to you."

"Where is God? Where shall I pray to Him?"

"Look there," she cried showing him the picture of the Virgin Mother hanging on a wall.

Venkatarayan stood looking at the picture for quite a long time. It gave him new life. He started home. On the way there

was a church. He looked in through a window. There too he saw a big picture on a wall. He stood gazing at it. By and by the picture seemed to take life and stepped out from the wall—a lady with a countenance that was love embodied. She came and stood beside him. He felt that his mother had indeed come to him in answer to his prayer, and he was glad beyond measure.

"My darling, my dear Venkatarayan," he heard her say. What a lovely voice! He felt her hand on his face and was thrilled. He had found his mother after all. She embraced and kissed him. "Follow me," she said, and led him on. They went far. She stopped every now and then to lift him up to her and kissed him. "My darling, you have suffered so long. Why did you not call me before," she asked. "I did not know, mother," said Venkatarayan and wept. "Don't cry," said his mother and wiped his eyes with the end of her saree. They walked on and on till they reached the house of the Christian priest. Venkatarayan stood at the gate. "This is a fine place Let's spend our time sitting in the garden. If we go home, she will scold us," he said and tried to go in.

"Do not go there," warned his mother.

"Why? What happens if we go there?" asked Venkatarayan.

"Somebody will come and then I shall not be able to stay. I shall have to go away," she said.

"I am very thirsty. Let's get some water from the garden well and come back here again. Come on." So saying he took her hand and went in.

"Child, who are you?" asked the priest, taking the cigar from his mouth and holding it in his hand as he came near the boy. The mother had disappeared.

"Mother! Mother!" screamed the boy. He ran hither and thither amidst the trees in the garden crying, "Mother! Where have you gone? Come back! Come back!"

The priest calmed the boy and took him home. When he had given him some water to drink, he said, "Child, who are you?" The boy had high fever.

"Child! Christ alone shall save us. He alone is God's peerless son. See his picture there. He shall protect you. See, there is the picture of His mother Virgin Mary, who begot Him here on earth. It was she who took pity on you and brought you here."

"No, no! It was my mother. Not Mary. I will find her out. I cannot live without her." So raving in high fever, he ran away. It was dark and the priest did not follow.

After wandering about he reached the little temple of Vinayaka near the cart-stand. It was not market day. So there was no one there. A tiny lamp that some one had lit before the idol burned unsteadily. Venkatarayan went and fell down before it. He lay there murmuring "Mother, mother!" and was soon fast asleep. At dead of night he sat up. His mother was sitting beside him!

"Mother!" he cried and hugged her. "You won't leave me again?" he wailed.

"No, no," she promised and stroked his face and kissed him. "If you come here every evening and sleep, I will come too. I cannot come to you during day-time," she said, and disappeared before daybreak.

From that day onwards, Venkatarayan came to sleep always in that temple. There was a new light in his face. He would roam about all day singing as he liked. People in the village thought that he had gone mad and pitied him; but the boy was really swimming in a sea of joy. In the night he would go three times round the idol with clasped hands, offer his prayer and then sleep behind the idol. His mother came every night without fail. All this went on for a long time.

"Alas! Poor insane child! So tender a thing to have this malady!" said the women at the well.

"It is all pretence," Kandasamy Ayyar's wife would say.

"Whether false or true, God alone knows," Kandasamy Ayyar would say and try to calm himself. It made him angry and jealous to see the faces of happy children in the village.

ROYAPPAN

One evening when Venkatarayan went to the temple to sleep as usual, there was no Vinayaka. The temple lay on the ground—a heap of stones and pillars. Somebody had broken down the temple to rebuild it. The work had already begun; the idol had been moved to some other place.

The poor boy sat amidst the stones and stayed awake all night. His mother did not come. His illusion was gone. The world was before him, again devoid of love.

So Venkatarayan went again to the church and peeped through the old window. He saw the picture of mother Mary on the wall. It looked like his mother, but she did not come down to him. The picture remained on the wall as a picture should.

For days he wandered amongst the broken-down temple and near the church as if looking for something lost. Then one day he went to the priest.

"Father, I would like to be converted," he said.

The priest called him and talked to him very kindly.

He spoke to the Karnam, Kandasamy Ayyar. "By the blessing of mother Mary, your boy has recovered from madness. He wants to become a Christian. We should not go against his wish."

"Alas! That cannot be done. We are Brahmins."

The priest did not press the matter further.

"Let him go. There is no other way. False or true let him be free from madness and be happy somewhere," said Ayyar's wife.

"Ram, Ram! Do not speak like that," replied Kandasamy Ayyar.

Then, one day the boy was missing from the village. He just disappeared, no one knew where.

He was baptised in Madras by a bigger priest and changed his name to 'Royappan.' He was taken on as a sales-boy by a newspaper owner. His parents knew nothing of this.

Though a Christian, Royappan would stand with clapsed hands when he saw an idol of Vinayaka. His nights were always

spent beside a Vinayaka. He seems still to be waiting for his mother to turn up. The other sales-boys are very fond of him.

* * * *

"This story is queer. Has it any moral? Please explain a little" asked the editor.

"No moral. It was written just for my peace of mind," said the author and smiled.

"You laugh like Royappan, indeed. Is this written to discourage widowers marrying again?"

"No, no. Marriage is always good."

"Is it to commend the worship of Vinayaka?"

"All worship is good. Yes, you may take it so."

"Perhaps it is a warning to step-mothers."

"Do step-mothers read your journal? It is good, then."

"In these days step-mothers take even better care of children than do their own mothers."

"May be. Times have changed. But there are all sorts of step-mothers, you know. A mother-in-law who has a child bride to take care of is a sort of step-mother. A lady who employs a small girl-servant is also a step-mother. A man who brings up a puppy is doing the duty of a step-mother. Anyone, man or woman, who takes charge of a growing mind and body is in the relation of a step-mother to it. Mother's love alone is natural love. But that is the ideal which other loves should try to approach. Others should try to love and behave like a mother with vigilance, discrimination and piety. Milk builds the growing child's body. But its mind needs the milk of love for its growth. Otherwise its soul withers."

"Go easy! No one asked for a lecture. You're making my headache. We take as good care of our sales-boys as possible. They're lazy, mischievous young devils; but we make allowance for them.

"I'm very glad to hear it. Take good care of Royappan. If at times he behaves in a curious way, do not get angry with him; but send him to the temple of Vinayaka."

SHANTI

The daughter-in-law was fourteen years old. "Lakshmi, I have drawn four pots of water. Draw four pots more and fill the bath-boiler. I am going to the kitchen," said the mother-in-law.

The girl let the pot into the well and stretching out her hand reached the rope and let the pot fill. When she was drawing up the pot her left arm began to hurt her so that she could hardly pull. She did not want to make a fuss; so, by holding down the rope with her foot, she pulled with her right arm and so managed to draw four or five buckets of water and to fill the boiler.

It was a poor family of old-fashioned ways. As soon as the daughter-in-law came of age, she was brought to live with her husband after the usual rites. Her mother-in-law was delighted to have a daughter-in-law. Who is not glad to have someone to dominate over?

Lakshmi did all the tasks her mother-in-law gave her diligently and happily; but drawing water she found was beyond her. She managed for two days with great difficulty. On the third day, at night, she hesitatingly said to her husband, "I have to tell you something. I hope you won't be angry."

"Tell me. What is it?" said Natesan. He spoke kindly.

"You will be angry," said she again.

"Don't be afraid. I promise I shan't be angry. Tell me," assured Natesan.

"I am unable to draw water from the well. My arm hurts. If I tell mother, I am afraid, she may misunderstand me." So saying she looked at her husband as if she had committed a great offence.

Natesan was inclined to be angry at first. He thought he saw the beginnings of the usual mother-in-law—daughter-in-law

dispute. Then, when his little wife explained her difficulty, he understood. He realized that it was no wanton quarrel but a physical defect in her arm.

Natesan could not sleep for a long while that night. In the morning he woke up with a new resolve. He usually took a little exercise after getting up. If, instead of that, he drew water and filled the boiler, it would be both exercise for himself and a solution of his wife's trouble. He made up his mind that he would consult a doctor about her arm.

"Natesan! What are you drawing water for? This is your wife's work. Are you punishing me for having asked her to draw a little water for the family?" his mother asked angrily.

"Of course not, mother. I am not doing this for her. I do it because it will do me good. Both of you can do the household work. I shall do this every morning for exercise," he said.

He thought that if he told his mother about his wife's arm she would be vexed with her, so he concealed the truth.

His mother continued to grumble. She thought that it was all the mischief of her impertinent daughter-in-law and she began to dislike Lakshmi.

Parvatiammal, Natesan's mother, had a daughter named Sitamma. She was older than Natesan. Her husband had died, and she had remained with her mother ever since. Her daily routine was idleness and fault-finding.

"Natesan's talk about health and exercise is all nonsense. It is merely her mischief. Nothing has happened to his health, which was all right till now," said Sitamma.

"Fancy a man drawing water for the family! It is shameful," declared the mother.

"Let the queen repose in peace. I will draw all the water and fill the boiler," said the daughter.

This kind of bickering went on. The new garden of Natesan's domestic life became overgrown with thorny shrub leaving no room for love to grow. Lakshmi's soul was in agony.

One day she got up early from her bed and slowly went to the well and, as on the first day, by using her foot, somehow drew enough water to fill the boiler. She then returned to her bed and slept. When Natesan got up and went, as usual, to draw water he saw that the boiler was already full. He concluded that his mother must have done it and went about his business quietly.

The same thing happened the next day. "What is to be done about this? Mother does not like me to draw water and put myself to trouble," he thought but spoke to no one about it. That night Lakshmi had fever and her left arm was swollen fearfully. Natesan then learned what had happened. He was worried and lay awake in bed, but after some time fell asleep.

"There is some permanent defect in her arm. What bad luck made us bring this curse into our house?" began the pitiless mother next day. Natesan could not bear it. He quarrelled with his mother. He also began to lose his temper with his wife who was ill and in great pain. Two days passed like this. Then he wrote to Lakshmi's father to come and take her home. The father-in-law accordingly came.

"Your daughter has some congenital trouble in her arm. Why did you not tell us about it?" asked Parvatiammal.

"My dear lady, it is not congenital. Her arm used to swell occasionally, that's all. I will take her home now and bring her back when she is well," he replied, preserving his calmness. He took his girl home, with the fever on.

"There were so many other offers. We rejected them all only to get a maimed girl for our son, and a thousand rupees. Was there no other way to discharge our debts? Look at our fate."

Parvatiammal and Sitammal talked to each other like this every day. Natesan received a letter from his father-in-law saying that the swelling in his wife's arm had gone down and her fever was less but that she was still confined to bed.

A month later, another letter came informing him of a relapse and renewed fever.

"This is an incurable disease, the result of past *karma*," said Parvatiammal.

"Probably so. We must suffer for our sins," said Natesan.

"You must marry again. I cannot bear this any longer," said the mother.

"Don't talk rot!" said Natesan, and went away to his office. He was a clerk in the Taluk Office.

A year passed like this. Then one day Parvatiammal's younger brother brought his 12-year-old daughter, Minakshi, with him when he came to Natesan's house.

"See, what a nice girl she is! She was very small at the time of your marriage, but for which we should certainly have married her to you. Why should we now hunt all round in search of a husband for her? Let her come to our house as she is a child of ours," said Parvatiammal.

At first Natesan hated this talk. But perseverance never fails and next year, in the month of Chitra, in the immediate presence of the God Tiruppati, Natesan's second marriage was performed.

II

Minakshi arrived at her husband's home about six months later. Parvatiammal was very kind to her and Minakshi was a very active and good girl. Though very young, she could do all the household work herself. Yet, in spite of everything being thus in order, there was no peace in Natesan's heart. Something troubled him in his mind.

"Why are you not affectionate towards me?" asked Minakshi.

"Why do you think I am not affectionate? Do I beat or scold you?" asked Natesan.

"You're not answering my question. The truth is that your mind is in Krishnapuram," said Minakshi.

Krishnapuram was the name of the village where Lakshmi lay sick.

Not long after Natesan's second marriage Lakshmi's fever became less severe and the swelling in her hand subsided. She was soon quite well.

"Look at this fraud. I hear she can now draw all the water needed in her mother's house, but when she was here she found it difficult to draw even four pots," cried Parvatiammal.

"She's thinking of coming here, the cheat! In the present state of our affairs, it seems, our poor boy will have to support two wives. Impossible," she said again.

"That's nothing, mother. Have you heard about her behaviour?" asked Sitammal.

"Don't open that shameful topic!" said the mother.

"I only hope it doesn't reach Natesan's ears. But who can stop people from talking?" said Sitammal.

But the people of Krishnapuram did not talk. They all pitied Lakshmi. They said, "Look at this cruel injustice. She has been abandoned simply because she was ill for a few days."

"It seems her husband has married again. Scandalous injustice!" some said. "Gem of a girl, she has been made helpless!"

"They should be dragged before a court of law and taught a lesson," said some others.

Thus some days passed. At first Lakshmi was ashamed to show her face outside and shut herself up in the house. How many days could she remain so? She began to go to the temple beside the river. It was a Hanuman's temple. She used to bathe in the river and offering a fruit to the idol said her prayers there. "Oh, Father! Did you not once save Sita, Why don't you turn your compassionate eyes on me?" Thus would she daily entreat the god.

Two years passed in this way. "I must have committed some great sin in my previous birth," she would console herself; and her faith in God was undiminished.

In Krishnapuram too, some indulged in the same kind of

scandal as that in which her mother-in-law and sister-in-law found pleasure.

"She could not have been expelled without some proper reason. There must have been something wrong," they began to say. Soon tales were spun. Her elder brother's wife began to complain. "How long can a girl stay away from her husband! It were better to pull out one's own tongue and die," she said aloud so as to be heard by Lakshmi, and there was no one to prevent her saying such things. Lakshmi's mother had died many years ago and her father was ill and wasting. He had now been bed-ridden for three months as a result of a septic foot. Lakshmi partly forgot her own sorrows while she was nursing her father during those three months.

Then the father called his son to him and said, "Dear boy, I shall not live. But first I must tell you something. Go and entreat Natesan and leave Lakshmi with him. Let her fare there as may be the will of God. She cannot remain here after I am gone." Saying this, he wept aloud and lost consciousness. He remained in that state for three days and then passed away.

III

Lakshmi's brother tried by several means to fulfil his father's desire. But everything failed. "Let no disreputable thing step over the door-step of my house," Parvatiammal declared. Her daughter supported her. Natesan, though he had the wish, had not the courage to take her back. He told Lakshmi's brother that it was impossible, and sent him away.

Lakshmi, as usual, had worshipped at the Hanuman temple and continued sitting nearby.

"Why are you weeping?" asked a cowboy who was standing there.

She used to give him the banana that she daily presented to her Hanuman and thus they had become friends.

She continued to weep without answering the boy's question.

"Do not weep, mother. God will help you; do not weep," he said.

"Little brother! God has no pity on me. I want to die. I am only weeping because death has not come to me," she said.

"My elder sister also used to weep like this and one day drowned herself in a well. She did it because her husband used to beat her terribly and she could bear it no longer. He was a drunkard and drove my sister to that fate," he said.

"If my husband beat me, I could bear that. I would not mind any amount of beating," she said.

"Then why do you weep?" he asked.

"You won't understand me, if I tell you. Little brother, your sister died and now she is happy. I too have made up my mind to die. But I am afraid. Come with me. Won't you just go with me up to the pond?" she said.

"And you fall into the water! No, I won't go with you," he said.

"You won't come? All right. I will go," she said and, prostrating before Hanuman, lay speechless for a long time. Then she got up and walked fast towards the part of the stream called the Big Pool.

"Don't! Don't! I entreat you. All will be well. If you die in the water you will become a ghost. Don't do it," cried the cowboy and followed her running.

The Big Pool was a deep hollow in the bed of the river. The river was in full flood and it was noonday. No human being was astir. A few cowherds were grazing their cattle far away on the other bank of the river. They did not hear or see. As soon as Lakshmi had jumped into the water the boy was frightened and ran away.

IV

"It is said she fell into the river and drowned herself. What a blessing after all!"

"Our family will no longer be the talk of the village. We are saved from scandal."

"People who die an unnatural death turn into ghosts, I have heard."

"Yes. She will have to suffer that state. Let her. She deserves it."

Parvatiammal, Sitammal and Minakshi, the daughter-in-law, it was who were speaking. Minakshi was in her seventh month.

Two months later, Minakshi had an easy delivery and a girl was born. It was a gala day in Natesan's house. We think of death as a great misfortune. But it is a great preventer of not a few sorrows and troubles. Without it life would be an eternal hell. When Lakshmi was reported drowned, how relieved many people felt! Even Natesan felt a kind of relief and peace.

Ten days after her baby was born, Minakshi began to have slight fever. "It is nothing. She will be all right," said an old woman who had come to see her.

Next day Minakshi began to talk wildly as if in delirium. "Keep quiet!" shouted the mother-in-law.

Minakshi glared at her. "Yes, I shall keep quiet indeed," cried the girl. "Did you not drive me out? I shall not leave you now." Again, "Oh! You have given birth to a child, have you? Whose child is this? Get up and run! Go and fall into the river and die!" she shouted wildly.

Her eyes rolled in hysterical frenzy and her body stiffened like a log of wood. She remained in that state for a short time. Then she sprang from the bed and began to run.

"My God! It is her ghost," cried Sitammal in great trepidation.

"God! Mother! I will give you anything you ask. Mariamma, save us," cried Parvatiammal.

Parvatiammal sent word secretly to the temple priest and arranged to offer a hen-sacrifice.

Astrologer Sitaramayyar chanted sacred hymns and gave the patient holy ash. Minakshi received the betel leaf containing ash, and placing it on the bed grew a little calmer. Everybody was glad to note the power of the holy ash.

"Put it on your face," said Natesan.

"Yes. I shall," she said and poured the ash into her hand. Then suddenly she blew off the ash and shouted, "Ha! Ha!"

"Now I shall not leave you! Where is that woman? I shall deal with her. Does she try to deceive me with holy ash?" she cried and laughed insanely.

"Ah wretch! This is the hussy that drowned herself, sure! Bring the broom," said Parvati.

Sitammal brought a broom.

Parvati took it and began to beat Minakshi on the head with it.

"Don't beat me. Don't beat me. I shall depart!" cried Minakshi.

"Go away! Go away!" shouted Parvati and began to beat her again.

"That is enough. Stop!" cried poor Natesan, frantic at the shocking scene.

"You don't understand, Natesa! Stand off!" cried Parvatiammal.

The devil-hunt went on for five days. But it was no good; the poor girl's mania increased.

"Puerperal insanity," said some.

"This is some curse," suggested others.

"I have no doubt this is she," said Sitammal.

"The hen was not enough. The deity wants the bigger offering. A goat-sacrifice is required," the priest told Parvatiammal in private and Parvatiammal arranged for that also without Natesan's knowledge. It was no good, however.

Four new moons went by and, as foretold by astrologer Sitaramayyar, Minakshi recovered and was quite well. The whole thing passed off like a dream, but as a result there was a new feeling of awe and respect for Lakshmi in everyone, not excepting Parvatiammal. They stopped talking about her. Minakshi was most affectionate and tactful once again. She had a vague feeling she had behaved foolishly during her illness. Everyone else felt relieved and remained silent about the affair and conducted themselves tactfully.

A year later Minakshi was to have another child. Parvati vowed to the gods secretly and openly, worshipping, offering and making sacrifices. When the day of delivery approached, Natesan arranged to get a nurse from the Mission Hospital in the neighbouring town of Pagalur. There was no discussion. Last time it was the village *dai* that helped, and things went wrong; so everybody agreed that it would be well if a trained midwife was sent for this time.

Minakshi's second delivery took place without any trouble and she gave birth to a son. The hospital midwife remained at her bedside at the time of delivery and visited her every day for a month. She took care to see that the mother suffered no mental disorder and that the infant was fed regularly. Natesan was afraid that the troubles of the last delivery might recur. He was very glad that all went well and offered ten rupees to the midwife. She refused to take it saying she did not want it.

"I am sorry I can only give you this much. I cannot afford more. Please take it and do not be offended."

"No, I do not want payment. I did not attend on this case for money. I came out of love," she said, and lifting up Minakshi's little baby played with it for some time.

She took leave of them saying, "Good-bye, Minakshi!" Somehow, while the midwife was talking, Natesan was reminded of his former wife. But he made up his mind not to indulge in such thoughts and calmed himself.

V

"Did no one recognize you, Shantidevi, when you were in the house?" asked the Pagalur hospital *padre*. Shantidevi was Lakshmi's new name.

"The hospital dress saved me. The women did not recognize me at all. The girl who was delivered does not know me and her husband did not look at me closely out of politeness. On the last day he seemed to suspect a little, but I drew my saree well over my face and escaped recognition."

"Good. Is your mind at rest?"

"Dear Father! It is indeed at peace. I am happy in nursing the sick. If you had not taken me out of the river, I should have been turned into an evil spirit as the cowboy foretold."

The *padre* laughed. "There is no such thing. That is only foolish talk. I hope you are happy," he said.

"I am not happy. But I am at peace, and that is enough. God and your reverence are sufficient protection for me," she said.

"Do you consent to go back to your husband? I can explain everything to him and arrange matters," he asked.

"No, Father! The innocent girl is happy. Why should I go?"

"If you do not wish to go to your husband, why should you not be baptised and stay here as one of us?" the reverend father asked.

"Hanuman will be angry," she said, and laughed.

On the next Dipavali day, "Shantidevi" went to Minakshi's village with a packet of crackers, a parcel containing sweets and some flowers in her bag. She met Minakshi's little girl playing in the street in front of the house.

"Kamala, here are some crackers for you," she said. The child recognized her as the "auntie" who had attended on her mother when the new baby was born. She took the crackers and sweets and stood with her back to Lakshmi for the flowers to be placed in her hair. Lakshmi stuck the flowers in the little girl's hair and gave her a kiss.

"Mother! Mother!" shouted the girl and went to Minakshi and told all about the midwife "auntie" and the sweets and the crackers.

"That midwife seems to be a very good woman," said Minakshi to her mother-in-law.

Parvati told Natesan, as soon as he came home, that the hospital midwife had been there and given crackers and sweets to Kamala and gone away without seeing them.

DEVAYANI

Ramanath and his wife Sitalakshmi drove to China Bazaar. Their shopping over, they had tea in a restaurant nearby, and again got into their car.

"Let's go to the beach," said Ramanath.

"Yes, let us. Tell the driver to stop the car somewhere where there is no crowd. I hate crowds. Look, there's a hawker selling toys. Let's buy two for the children."

Before Sitalakshmi had finished speaking, the toy-man seemed to have guessed her thoughts and came to the car. They chose the toys and were settling the price from inside the car, when a young beggar-woman carrying a small child in her arms came to the other door of the car and holding out the baby, cried, "Sir! charity! Look at this young baby."

"Aren't these all Japanese toys?" asked Ramanath.

"Surely. Can they make such things in our country?" replied the toy-man.

The beggar-woman began her entreaties again.

"What a pest she is to trouble us when we are buying and bargaining. The beggar-nuisance is on the increase," said Sitalakshmi.

"My lady, I am hungry. Take pity on this baby. God will bless you."

"Will you go away or shall I call the policeman?" threatened Sitalakshmi.

"The child is crying for milk, lady. Please throw an anna-piece. It is nothing to you."

Ramanath put their purchases inside the car and told the chauffeur to drive to the beach.

The chauffeur ordered the beggar-woman to step aside and started the car.

She tried to run alongside for some distance, holding on to the door and crying 'Sir, Sir!'

"Let go! Let go! You'll be knocked over," cried Ramanath. He happened then to look at the girl closely and thought he had seen her somewhere before.

When the car was at last moving, he remarked, "Poor girl. She seems to come from our village."

"Let her come from anywhere she likes. What's it got to do with us? Let me see that toy; it seems to be a new sort. Is it an aeroplane? Can it be wound? Will it move?" she asked and began to examine the toys one by one as they drove to the beach.

II

The scene is a poor weaver-family in Perianna Mudali Street in Ponnammapet in Salem. Vyapuri was thirty years old. His sister, Devayani, was twenty and unmarried. Palaniammal was their mother. They eked out a livelihood by handloom-weaving, the family-profession for generations. Working throughout the day, the three of them together were able to earn about four rupees a week.

As the trade in handloom products declined, wages went down. After a time, many had to go without even the reduced wages. Many looms besides Vyapuri's remained idle in Salem. Devayani got work—sweeping and sprinkling the house-front with water and cow-dung, and doing miscellaneous tasks in the houses of two Brahmin officials. In this way she earned three rupees a month. Her mother earned another rupee for similar sweeping and watering at another house. Vyapuri went from one merchant to another in the cloth business in search of work but to no purpose. In despair he went away to Bangalore, without telling his mother. A few other weavers went with him in the hope of getting work in the big mills at Bangalore.

After wandering about for a few days, Vyapuri wrote to say he had found a job in a mill. He could read and write a little, for his father had put him in the municipal school in Ponnam-

mapet when he was a small boy. The life of weavers had not been so hard in those days.

"After bribing a lot of people, I have at last got a job in the mill. The daily wage is eight annas and there are twenty-six working days in a month. I shall, therefore, get thirteen rupees per month. After paying for food and something towards the discharge of my debts, I can save and send you two rupees a month. As for the rest, there is God," wrote Vyapuri in a letter which was interpreted to the mother and sister by neighbour Marimudali's boy. The old woman and Devayani were supremely happy.

Ten days later, another letter came. It ran: "Obeisance to my mother. I am well here, by God's grace. I hope you and Devayani are well. I do not at all like the work in this mill. My eyes fill with tears when I think of the happy days I spent, working at the loom in our house. I feel I shall go mad here. My head reels. My sorrow and troubles are too many to recount. I wonder why I left Salem. Try and write a letter with the help of the boy living next door. Address it to Salem Ponnammapet Vyapuri, Cooly Line, Malleswar."

III

One of the families where Devayani did the sweeping and sprinkling was a Government pensioner's. His wife was a benevolent woman. Though strict in extracting work, she was kind to Devayani in other matters. She gave her an old saree and would give her what remained over of the rice and soup cooked for the family. Some days passed like this. The gods, it appears, cannot suffer even this much joy. The cook of the house, who used to give her the leavings, began to make love to her. One day he behaved very badly.

Devayani was beside herself with anger. But she was ashamed to tell anyone. "Do not tell anyone. I will pay you two rupees every month," the rogue insisted.

Controlling her grief, she went home and said to her mother, "Amma! I cannot work in that house of the mergosa tree."

When her mother asked her for the reason, Devayani went red with shame and told her what had happened. The old woman got up saying, "I will tell the mistress of the house."

"Don't, mother. What is the use of telling them? I am not going to work in that house any more," Devayani said.

They searched for work elsewhere. There was some one already engaged in whatever house she went to. Wandering about for two months, they got work at last.

Six months passed. There was a strike in the mill in which Vyapuri was working. The manager, a European, had beaten a mistri. Thereupon the *mistri* and a few labourers were dismissed. The workers met and after receiving their month's wages downed tools. Vyapuri had to join in the strike.

It lasted a month. The workers held meetings. There was great enthusiasm at first, but when the money they had was all spent, excitement waned. A compromise was effected and they all went back to work. A week later, a notice was stuck on the gate, with a list of twenty-five men who were declared dismissed and were warned against entering the mill-area. Vyapuri was one of the twenty-five.

"I am quite innocent. I am a new hand; I had nothing to do with it," he complained to his *mistri*.

"It is the manager's order. This is the work of that villain Rangaswami Naicken, the time-keeper. He has given your name along with the others. I cannot do anything in the matter," said the *mistri*.

He went and pleaded with Rangaswamy Naicken. "I do not know anything about it. It is the cash clerk's work," he said. No one would help him. "You fellow, you know how to read and write. You must have incited the others. I cannot take you back," the manager finally told him.

After wandering about for many days, and spending all his savings, Vyapuri reached Madras with great difficulty. Ten of the twenty-five who had been dismissed, accompanied him to

Madras in search of employment. All money they had was pooled and they all lived on it, and went from mill to mill begging to be employed. After some days, Vyapuri got work in a mill.

In order to tip the gate-keeper and other small officials in the mill, he needed five rupees. To do this and to discharge the debt incurred for food, he pawned his gold ear-rings and borrowed; to forget his troubles, he began to drink a little, though he had never touched liquor when he was at Salem. When some friends suggested that he could earn a lot of money by gambling, he got into that habit also. What remained after paying for food and rent, instead of being sent home, was spent in this manner. His debt to the Pathan money-lender grew. Troubles increased and to drown them he indulged in more drinking.

At first he wrote home, making excuses for not being able to send them money. Then he wrote that he was no longer able to send any money home but that Devayani might come to Madras if she liked and join some mill. Devayani and Palaniamma were heart-broken.

After many days of sorrow and trouble suffered patiently, Devayani said one day, "Mother, why shouldn't I go to Madras? I will work and earn something as Vyapuri does and try to send you some money. I hear that there are quite a number of women working in the mills in Madras."

The mother would not agree at first. "How can such a thing be allowed? How can helpless young women go and work in such places?" She argued thus for a few days, but in the end she consented. Devayani pawned her gold ear-rings to Marappan, her neighbour, borrowed twelve rupees from him and left for Madras.

IV

Vyapuri got Devayani admitted in the spinning department of a mill in Madras. It was not the mill in which Vyapuri worked. A hundred and fifty women, some even younger than Devayani, worked in it. Devayani and ten others had to work under a

jobber, who was kind to her at first. But he soon began to scold her about her work and then to talk to her too freely sometimes, specially when he could catch her alone.

Devayani asked a fellow-worker, "What does all this mean, sister? Why does he speak to me like this?" The woman laughed and said, "Don't you even know that much? You are a village girl. If you don't please him, you will lose half your wages in fines. If he is pleased, you will have many conveniences."

Devayani bore it all for some time. Then she began to lose faith in God and ceased resisting the *mistri's* advances. She adjusted her mind and began to talk to him engagingly. Soon she even found pleasure in it. Her wages increased.

Some months passed. Devayani found she was going to be a mother. She was frightened and prayed to all the deities she knew. "Whom shall I tell?" she asked herself. She was agitated and quivered in fear like a doe, sore pressed by hunters in a forest. She was afraid to tell her brother Vyapuri. Some of the girls she worked with knew her trouble and made jokes at her expense and laughed. She thought of returning home, but there she was sure she would be disgraced and driven out of caste by her people. When she thought of her mother she finally abandoned all idea of going home. She at last resigned herself to God and went on doing her work in the mill.

Soon, however, she was in a state of great agitation again. "Alas! What shall I do? I have disgraced my people."

"Don't worry, Devayani. This happens to us all. There is medicine for this which will free you of your burden at once," a friend assured her.

"I've heard about it, but I'm afraid. It may kill me. Oh God! Where shall I go and hide my shame?" she wailed.

Her friend said, "Get two rupees somehow. There is a woman in Muttuswami Achari Street who will do all you want."

Devayani said, "If the police come to know of it, they will surely catch me."

"Don't worry about that," her friend said, "The police are great friends of hers. Money will do everything, you should know."

"Alas! Where shall I go for money? O God! You have deserted me. Why did I ever come to this wretched city?" cried Devayani

Some days later another woman gave her different advice. "You should not kill your baby. The sin would make you accursed for three generations. There is an old dame in Pillayar Koil Street. She is a very good woman. If you go to her she will take care of everything. Many women like you have stayed in her house and have been safely delivered."

Devayani thanked her. "God bless you, sister," she said. Devayani went to the philanthropic dame in Pillayar Koil Street. The delivery took place in due course. The soft touch of the baby changed everything in the world for Devayani. It was a miracle. She forgot all her misery. Her child was the whole world to her.

She would take up her baby and put it to her breast saying, "This bud is God's gift to me. It has done no wrong. I am the sinner." She was happy for some days oblivious of all trouble.

"You cannot go to work now. You must stay here for some time longer," said the Pillayar Koil Street lady-philanthropist.

Devayani thanked God. "How wrong it was of me to curse the world when it contained such good people," she thought.

She learned the truth a month later. The old woman was conducting a house of ill fame, with helpless women who had been entrapped by deceitful men. Devayani was caught in the net. She did not go to work in the mill again.

V

"Don't you remember Devayani, the girl who worked for us in Salem? This beggar-girl looked just like her," said Ramanath.

Ramanath was the eldest son of the retired pensioner in

whose house in Salem, Devayani first had gone to work. He was a cashier in a big bank in Madras.

"How can the Salem girl be here? You're dreaming," said Sitalakshmi.

"It is a shame that such girls should be carrying new-born babies about to beg in the streets. What a state our country has come to!" observed Ramanath.

"You are always thinking of your country. Isn't it enough to take care of our own family?" said his wife.

Ramanath was even unable to forget the beggar-woman the next evening. He went straight from his office to China Bazaar. Expecting to meet her again and hoping to question her about her affairs, he drove along China Bazaar and stopped the car in front of the same restaurant and waited for some time. Many beggars came and surrounded him shouting, "Sir, Sir," but she did not come.

On Saturday evening Ramanath and his wife went along China Bazaar agan. "Look, there's your beggar-woman!" said Sitalakshmi.

Yes, it was she. She was carrying her child and approaching somebody's car crying, "Mother, give an anna: look at this child."

She had seen Ramanath's car and its occupants, but left it for the other car, because she knew she would get nothing from them. Beggars learn to judge by experience. There is scope for intelligence and skill in everything. Ramanath could not summon the courage to accost the woman himself. He waited for some time expecting that she would come to his car next. But she disappeared in the crowd and was not seen again.

"Let's go," said Sitalakshmi.

Eight days later Ramanath and Sitalakshmi went to a cinema. The story was the old one of King Nala.

There was a great crowd in front of the gate. Damayanti's part was to be acted by the new star Danabhagyam.

House full! House full!

"Shall we go home and come back for the next show?" asked Ramanath.

Before Sitalakshmi replied, some one approached the door of the car crying, "Mother, give us alms!"

Ramanath turned to see if it was the Salem woman. She had become an obsession with him now, but it was someone else, not she.

"If we stop the car here, we shall be worried by beggars. Raman Nair, drive the car home quickly," said Sitalakshmi to the chauffeur.

At the same time a policeman waved his stick and drove the beggar-woman away.

That night Ramanath saw the beggar-woman but only in a dream.

"Are you Devayani? Where do you come from?" asked Ramanath.

The woman opened her eyes wide and asked with joy, "Are you not the son of the Salem gentleman, living in the margose-tree house?"

"Nair, ask her to get into the front seat," he told his driver.

He reached home, and his wife said, "Why did you bring this wretch here?"

"Why shouldn't we keep her as our servant? We can pay her four rupees a month and give her food," he said.

"Nice idea indeed! To keep fallen women in our house! What wisdom!—Get out," said Sitalakshmi and drove the woman out.

"I won't steal. I shall do whatever you command me to do," pleaded the wretched woman.

"Impossible. Get out of my house," said Sitalakshmi.

Ramanath tried to put his hand in his pocket to take out his purse intending to give her a rupee. He could not move his hand or reach his purse. The beggar's child began to cry loudly.... He woke up. It was all a dream! His own child Radha was sitting on the bed crying.

"God be thanked. Sitalakshmi could not have been so cruel. It was only a dream," he said to himself and was glad.

For many days thereafter Ramanath looked for Devayani in the bazaar, at the railway station, in the cinemas and everywhere. But he never saw the beggar-woman again.

AN ELECTION STORY

In Kottur, the principal town in the district of the same name, there lived in the Harijan quarters—formerly called Kattancheri, but now for the last four years known by the different appellation of Jamespet—a Harijan named Sirangan, the only one among the thirty odd Harijans in that place who was fairly well-to-do. Most of the inhabitants of Jamespet were coolies who supported themselves by working on the plantations in the Sonai hills for daily wages. Sirangan was not a cooly. He supplied at a small profit goods bought in Kottur and from neighbouring markets to the European owners of coffee and tea plantations and thus made a reasonable income. All the ladies and gentlemen in the hills were kind to him and trusted him.

Report of Supplier Sirangan's honesty and good qualities had even reached the District Collector of Kottur. When the seat of the Harijan member in the Municipal Board fell vacant and had to be filled, the police superintendent, the district medical officer, and the London Mission *padre* pressed the Collector to nominate Swamipriyan, butler in the English Club. The Collector's wife vetoed the proposal. She said that all the white ladies in the hills had recommended supplier Sirangan, so he should be given the place. Naturally, she succeeded in persuading her husband that what she insisted on was right! The Collector said to the other officials, "You do not understand. If we nominate the club butler, the patriots in the town will start agitating and create trouble. We must proceed tactfully." So, after meeting all their objections, he recommended Sirangan's name and got him nominated.

Sirangan's prosperity began to wane from that moment. He had become a big man. Had not the Collector and the big officials shaken hands with him and spoken to him? Having become a big man, he did not attend to his business properly. Instead of buying his goods himself, he sent his nephew Varadan. He only

went to the hills once in a way, generally sending Varadan in his place. He gave his nephew a share in the profits, and, as his attention to his business lessened, his profits also went down. Since he did not get enough to maintain his family, he began to spend out of the advances given to him by the planters' wives. Out of consideration for an old and faithful customer and because of his new position as a municipal councillor, the shopkeepers allowed him credit. He had to tell a few lies to the ladies while rendering accounts. Dishonesty in business, small or big, soon causes complications and finally brings its owner into irrevocable ruin. Sirangan lost the respect he had formerly won. The opinion that used to be voiced half in jest and half in earnest that Sirangan was the most honest of the city councillors now ceased to be expressed.

The municipal chairman, Gopala Chettiar, died suddenly and arrangements for the election of his successor were begun. The big yarn-merchant Dhanapala Chettiar stood as a candidate with Vakil Ramaswamy Mudaliar as his chief rival. In the bazaar and among the lawyers this election formed the only topic of conversation for a whole month.

The hunt for votes began. Four days before the date fixed for the election, there was talk of money changing hands. Some said that the Chettiar had earmarked a thousand or two thousand rupees for each councillor. It was partly true and partly false. Ramaswamy Mudaliar made it perfectly clear that he was resolved not to resort to such tactics. This damped the ardour of his friends. Disregarding all their advice, Mudaliar obstinately stuck to his resolve.

The election was to take place at 8 o'clock on Monday morning. Ramaswamy Mudaliar's staunch friends gathered at his house at 8 p.m. the previous night—Sunday.

"Of course, you will lose nothing by this. The shame will be ours only," said the snuff-dealer Rangapillai.

"We can't remain in Kottur after this defeat. We shall have to go elsewhere," said shopkeeper Sitaramayyar.

"Is it right on your part to drag us all into this disgrace?" asked Viraraghava Chettiar. The last named gentleman was Dhanapala Chettiar's brother-in-law and had formerly been his partner in business also. But ever since their separation, they had been bitter enemies.

Mudaliar did not reply.

Sitaramayyar again spoke. "Are we simply to look on while this fellow is corrupting the public and ruining the municipality?"

"What can we do against the corruption of the times? Chairmen in the old days were more respectable. Nowadays honest men have no chance anywhere," said Mudaliar.

"Poison removes poison; Mudaliar, you should take a keener interest in this matter. This indifference will not do," said the Ayurvedic physician Raghavachari.

Two minutes later, the clock struck nine. Sitaramayyar got up saying, "Look! the clock gives us a good omen. Why should we waste any more time?" and putting a hand on Mudaliar's shoulder led him in an affectionate way to the latter's office room.

They conferred apart for an hour. Then Sitaramayyar came out smiling and addressing the meeting said, "It is all right. The thing is done. We can now do what is necessary. There is only one night to do it in." There was an outburst of delight.

Motor-cars flew about all night. At 2 a.m. news reached Mudaliar at his house that out of thiry-five councillors, seventeen had finally declared for him. Ten of them had even returned the money they had received from Chettiar. Seven declared they would not take money from either side but would surely vote for Mudaliar. They had to make sure of just one more vote. Out of the remaining eighteen, one had gone to Negapatam on business. He would not be able to get back next day. Sixteen were solidly for Dhanapala Chettiar, and could not be shaken. Sirangan's vote alone remained and was uncertain. He was not to be found though they looked for him everywhere. He was reported to have gone to the hills.

"Did you ask his younger brother Muniswami, the teacher," said snuff-dealer Rangapillai.

"Yes. We approached him. He says one thing at one moment and another thing the next. First he says Sirangan may have gone to the hills. Then he says he is hiding somewhere in the house. Why should poor people be caught in these difficult things? They have to be tactful. If they oblige one, they will incur the displeasure of the other."

"It seems that in spite of the tremendous effort we have made we shall get no results," said Sitaramayyar.

"What is the use of pessimism?" said Rangapillai in great anger, standing up.

"Why don't you then try yourself?" retorted Sitaramayyar.

"Who will believe us, poor folk? We are not rich," said Rangapillai.

"Mudaliar! Let Rangapillai do everything. I shall do nothing further. I have washed my hands of the whole affair," said Sitaramayyar.

"This is no time for quarrelling!" exclaimed Viraraghava Chettiar, pulling Sitaramayyar who had got up aside and pushing him into his seat again. He went up to Mudaliar and said, "We should not have got involved in this business at all. Having taken it up, we must bring to a successful end. Shall the mouth miss what the hand has grasped? Hand over this affair of Sirangan to Rangapillai. There is God above. Our side must win!"

Even Mudaliar was enthused. He went inside. They heard the sound of a box being opened and shut. He came out with a bag and, taking Rangapillai with him, went into another room.

Snuff-dealer Rangapillai went to Jamespet. He saw Muniswami and gave him a hundred rupees in silver coins tied up in five paper packets without speaking a word. Muniswami had not at any period in his life handled so large a sum in silver at one

time even in his dreams. He stood staring at Rangapillai, with a mad light in his eyes.

Rangapillai said, "Many people would have reproached you. But who will trust or help a poor fellow these days? Who can understand the difficulties that face the poor. Brother, this money is yours, whether we win or lose. Where is Sirangan? Tell me the truth."

"I should not tell you a lie. Sirangan is being kept under lock and key by Dhanapala Chettiar in his stable and is well guarded. He already owes Chettiar about a hundred and fifty rupees. Didn't you know? They will take him along with them to the municipal office tomorrow," said teacher Muniswami.

"Muniswami, do as I tell you in this affair. Never mind the cost," said Rangapillai.

They whispered together for a time. Then saying, "Please stay here," Muniswami went inside Sirangan's house.

After speaking for a while to Sirangan's old mother, he came out again and, making Rangapillai sit on the stone bench in front of the Cheri Mariamman temple, he got into the carriage in which the latter had come, and drove to Dhanapala Chettiar's house.

Dhanapala Chettiar was sitting with his friends on the bench in the porch of his house. They were making pencil notes in the light of a hurricane lantern. Muniswami alighted from the carriage and fell at Chettiar's feet and said, "My master! please forgive me for disturbing you. Sirangan's mother is dying. I doubt if she will survive till we go back. You must let Sirangan go and see her."

"What has happened to the old woman all of a sudden? This is all humbug. Or, has Mudaliar sent you here?" asked Dhanapala Chettiar.

"Alas! God above is my witness. Can lies save us? The old woman is really suffering from diarrhoea. She will not live. She has had twenty motions since yesterday and is lying unconscious.

Do send my brother at any cost, I beg of you. Otherwise, our mother's soul will suffer the most poignant agony," he said and wept most piteously.

"All right, Srinivasayyar, go with Sirangan and see what's the matter and come back and tell us," said Chettiar to his clerk.

"There's some trick behind this. Chettiar's nature is to trust every one," said some one there.

Clerk Srinivasayyar went in, took Sirangan out of the stable, and led him out by the backyard to where the carriage stood. Muniswami went and joined them.

"What are you hesitating about, Srinivasayyar? Get into the carriage," said Dhanapala Chettiar.

Untouchability and all that were forgotten. One cannot observe such things in election work. They all got into the same carriage.

V

When the carriage halted before Sirangan's house in Jamespet there rose a loud wailing from inside.

"The story seems to be true," said Srinivasayyar to himself and asked Sirangan to go and see what was the matter.

Sirangan and Muniswami went in. After a while Muniswami came out and said in the Brahmin clerk's ears, "Life is gone!" and went inside the house again.

"Alas! you are gone; oh! you have left us! Our family is ruined," they cried aloud in the house.

Srinivasayyar asked a boy who was standing near, watching him, "What has happened in this house?"

"Why do you ask? It is cholera. The old woman is dead," said the boy.

Srinivasayyar was frightened. He was in the untouchable quarter and to top it all there was cholera. He decided there was no point in waiting. Muniswami also came out.

"The old woman is unconscious, Sir. She can neither speak nor breathe. I fear she is gone. I will be responsible for Sirangan; please go." Ayyar hastened back home.

In the house the old woman made signs and beckoned her son to come near her. Sirangan put his ear close to his mother's mouth.

"My son, they promise to pay a thousand rupees. Who could refuse it? Do not be a madcap. Listen to an old woman," she said.

Sirangan said, "What is this conspiracy? Did you call me only for this?"

"Oh!" cried Muniswami and the others took it up and there was a loud lamentation.

"My son," said the old woman again. "I have no cholera nor anything else, but I feel strange. Take the thousand rupees that the snuff-merchant has brought and give up this cursed business once for all. Pay off your debts and lead a decent life. I have not many more days to live."

Sirangan stood speechless, confounded at once by fear, anger and surprise.

"Ah! alas!" wailed everybody in the house prompted by Muniswami.

VI

Then Sirangan came and stood beside Rangapillai.

"Get into the carriage, Siranga. I shall explain everything when we get to Mudaliar's house," said Rangapillai. They all got in and Rangapillai began, "Sirangan, you are a lucky fellow. Everybody is making money, so why shouldn't you? What fault have you committed? Don't neglect the chance now. Tell me what you want and I shall see to it. I am responsible for getting it done," and he continued talking to Sirangan in that strain till the carriage reached Mudaliar's house.

Rangapillai spoke apart to Mudaliar for a few minutes. He then came out with a small cloth bundle, went to Sirangan, who

was sitting on the verandah outside, and placing it before him said, "Look here, here is what you cannot get though you work all your life. Pay off all your debts and start some business. There is a lot more you can get from Mudaliar. He will see to it that you want nothing."

Sirangan was dumb.

Viraraghava Chettiar took up the bundle and placed it on Sirangan's lap and said, "Get up and swear. Everything is finished. Why do you hesitate still?"

Sirangan took the bundle from his lap and placed it aside on the floor. He pretended to think for a minute. Everybody waited silently expecting he would say something.

Then suddenly he jumped up and ran out into the street. Some of them ran after him. But he ran so fast, they soon lost sight of him. They returned, saying, "He is gone."

Mudaliar took the bundle of money and went inside. After locking it up he returned. "See, the rogue has cheated us," he said.

"He has proved his low birth," they all said.

At the election meeting next day, Sirangan was not present.

"His mother died," said some.

"No, no! That was all a put up job," said others.

The councillor who had been to Negapatam was back and ready to vote.

"Dhanapal Chettiar will get twenty-six votes," someone said.

"No, no! They will both get seventeen and there will be a casting vote," said another.

"It is all money," said a third.

"They will even receive money and betray the rogues," said another.

In the end, Dhanapala Chettiar got twenty-three votes,

Mudaliar ten votes and there was one blank paper. On hearing this result, the crowd outside shouted cheers for Dhanapala Chettiar.

"Corruption!" cried people of the opposite faction.

"Sirangan is the only honest man," said Mudaliar.

THE GODS ARRIVE

Sundar Chettiar was a cloth merchant. He began his business with a small capital and through his honesty and prudence made a good fortune by it. His wife Minakshi was a very pious lady. She followed the old traditional rules of life, including a strict fast every month on Ekadasi day. At noon every day she would come out of the house, scatter rice to the crows and sparrows and then sit down for her meal. Chettiar treated his wife with great respect. He believed that his business prospered simply because of his wife's piety.

"Jai Sitaram!"

A middle-aged man in the garb of an ascetic, brightness in his face and a begging bowl in his hand, entered Chettiar's house with this cry.

It was the day before Dipavali. Chettiar's wife welcomed the ascetic with both hands full of rice. The venerable man said: "I do not want rice. Give me cooked food, if you have it."

"The cooking will soon be over. Please wait a while," she said and placed a plank for him to sit on.

When the ascetic had been served and his meal was over, he said, "Madam, you will never suffer from want. You are virtuous and devoted to your husband. I will teach you a sacred mantra. If you rub oil on your head and bathe and repeat this mantra, you will see your ancestors, heavenly beings and sages."

Sundar Chettiar's devout wife was enraptured. She learned the mantra. She got up very early next morning, anointed herself and bathed and repeated the mantra a thousand and eight times as the sage had instructed her. As soon as she had done so, she heard a great welcome shout and the sound of conches. There was a big crowd in front of the place of worship

where splendid seats were arranged in a circle and occupied by great beings with radiant faces.

She saw her great grand-father, her husband's great-grand-father and many others. There was one with a flute in his hands, who appeared to be the god Lord Krishna. Beside him stood one with a great bow in his hand looking like Rama. Next to him stood the aged sage Vashishta. Balarama was also there, carrying his plough. There, too, was the other terrible 'Rama' with the battle-axe. On another side Bhima, Arjuna and Dharmaputra were seated. Wherever she turned her eyes, she saw rishis and the great men of sacred India. They appeared to change their forms, sometimes appearing as one and sometimes another. The place was so crowded that there was no space 'for even a seed of sesamum to get through and fall down.' At this sight, Minakshi was enthralled and fell into a swoon crying "Narayana!"

Hearing his wife's cry, Chettiar came running down the stairs from the first floor. He did not understand what he saw. "Who are these people assembled here in strange garb? Who has staged this play?" he asked himself as he looked round. Being a cloth merchant, he naturally turned his attention first to the clothes that everybody wore. "It must be a demonstration of the followers of Gandhi," he thought. All of them were wearing Khaddar. Some were wearing coarse Khaddar, some fine Khaddar and some medium Khaddar. But all were clad in Khaddar of some sort.

"Revered gentlemen! Why have you come here? The police will object," said Chettiar.

There was great laughter.

"You may laugh; you may be ready to go to jail. I am not," said Chettiar. "Will you please go to some other house. There is the lawyer's next door. You may go to his house and hold your performance there," he added.

"Son!" cried an old gentleman, approaching Chettiar. "Don't you recognize me? Sundar, I am the father of your grandfather

who begot your father. Why are you afraid," and he embraced and kissed him affectionately.

"This is all very well, grand gentleman! Your performance is very fine indeed. I fall down at your feet. But kindly leave my house; I do not want this 'Khaddar' meeting here. There is a holy festival today and it will not be proper to have the police coming in and troubling us on such a day," said Chettiar.

"My dear son, what do you mean by Khaddar? We know no other cloth but this. When I was living here on earth, I used to wear only this kind of cloth. All of us wore the same sort of cloth. We could not help doing so as we had no other. I went to Heaven in the same clothes. You see, clothes don't wear away or get torn in Heaven. Your devoted wife called me, and I came in a hurry," said the old gentleman.

Chettiar was completely nonplussed. "This is all humbug. It must be a meeting of Congressmen, or why should they all be wearing Khaddar?" He approached Dharmaputra who somehow inspired trust by his very aspect. Prostrating himself before him, Chettiar said, "You, sir, appear to be honest. Please tell me the truth. What is all this?"

"My son," said Dharmaputra, "nothing is wrong and you have no cause for fear or suspicions. When we lived here on earth, we knew no other cloth but homespun. You call it Khaddar now; but we had no other cloth and only that in those days could we wear. At that time no cloth came from outside India and there was plenty in the country. We used to export it. There were no mills in our country nor anywhere else. We continue to wear that same cloth in Heaven even now. Why don't you still wear it? I hear there is much poverty in the country. Is it so?"

Chettiar now picked up enough courage after saluting them carefully, to examine between his thumb and forefinger the cloth that each one wore. Rama, Balarama, Krishna, Parasurama, Bhishma, Arjuna, everyone was wearing pure Khaddar.

"This is curious! I thought it was only Mahatma Gandhi

who had recently started this joke and insisted on everyone wearing Khaddar. But everyone in this assembly is wearing it," thought Chettiar and looked at his wife.

Minakshi had not yet fully recovered from her swoon of reverential joy, when there arose a chorus of "God bless you, we are going" and the Chettiar's hall was empty.

It is indeed a fact that our great ancestors had no other kind of cloth. They died in those clothes and still wear them in Heaven. Why should we not wear it here also? There is reason to believe that we shall get back our old greatness too by doing so.

THE INNOCENT CHILD

"Mother! If I go near it, the white cow threatens to gore me; but before Karuppan it stands quiet. Why?"

"It is used to him; that's why it remains quiet. It is not used to you, so it attacks you."

"Shall I make it get used to me too, mother?"

"No, no. Why should you? You can play, but he is a pariah and has to graze the cow. Come here, eat this cake."

Subba was four years old. He had a way of talking beyond his age and was much petted by his parents. He was born after his mother had had two girls.

"Mother, how do you make cakes like this?"

"With sugar, dal and coconut pulp. Eat it and tell me if it's good."

"What is a pariah? Why doesn't Karuppan come inside the house? Everybody else does."

"Because he is a pariah."

"But what is a pariah?"

"You wouldn't understand if I told you. Stop asking questions and eat your *poli.*"

"I won't eat it. Why shouldn't Karuppan come inside the house?"

"Stop being a nuisance and run along. See how dirty he is! If he came inside, we should all be polluted."

"What does 'polluted' mean, mother? Is it cow-dung?"

"Cow-dung is not pollution. His body is very dirty. He never bathes. He is a pariah."

"Can I ask Karuppan to bathe in our house then?"

"What nonsense! Run along now and don't play with him any more."

"I will play with him and with no one else. Give him a *poli* too."

"No, never. Not to a pariah boy. If I did, all the *poli* in the house would be polluted. Go now, uncle is asking for you outside. Go and see what he wants."

"First give me another *poli.* I must give him one. Let him eat one too."

"Go away. Eat it here and then go, but don't go near him."

"Then, I do not want it," he said and putting it down ran away to the yard behind the house.

"Karuppa, are you a pariah?"

"Yes."

"Am I a pariah?"

"What! You are a Brahmin, I am a pariah."

"Have you got a mother?"

"Oh yes! I have."

"Is she like my mother?"

"Yes."

"Does she make *poli* for you?"

"*Poli*! No we have no *poli* in our house," he said laughing.

"Today is Dipavali. We all rubbed ourselves with oil and bathed in warm water today. Did you take a bath too?"

"Our well has dried up. Where has father money to buy oil?"

"Bathe in our house."

"God forbid! Will they let us in?"

"You come with me. If you bathe first and get clean, they will let you inside the house."

"No, they won't! They'll kick me out."

"No, no. My mother will never beat you."

While they were talking uncle Krishna Ayyar came in.

" Here you are, Subbu, here's a packet of crackers."

Subbu took a leap at his uncle and climbed on his shoulder Krishna Ayyar kissed him and gave him the packet of crackers "Do you know how to light them?"

"Oh! Yes. Of course, I know," he said, opening the packet and spreading out the crackers. "Cut them into two halves and give one half to Karuppan."

"Why should the pariah boy have any? Don't touch him. Come, let us go in," he said and looking at the pariah boy threateningly said, "You pariah boy, why are you so impudent? Don't come so close to our child. Off with you!"

Karuppan ran and stood at a distance. But his eyes remained fixed on the packet of crackers. .

When Subbu's mother came in, Krishna Ayyar said: "Look at your lovely boy, Savitri. He wants me to give crackers to the pariah boy." He lifted Subba up and kissed him.

"Isn't he wonderful? What can I say about him?" she said proudly and, taking him in her arms, hugged and kissed him.

Subbu did not understand. Karuppan took the cow out and went away to the farm.

Then Subbu's sister Parvati came in singing one of Bharati's songs:

"The Pariahs shall be free,
The Thiyahs shall be free
And the Pulayas too, and the Pulayas too.
Freedom for all, for all."

"Mother, have you seen the paper today? They say that all the temples will be opened to the pariahs," she said.

"I do not know where all this will lead to," said Savitri.

"Don't you know? The world is now going topsy-turvy," said Krishna Ayyar.

SITARAM

Sub-Collector Sitaram's salary was Rs. 1,200 per month, but his family expenditure was on a very frugal basis. Frugal? The other officers in the town and their wives called him a wretched miser.

Sitaram's domestic life was marked by extreme affection between husband and wife, though there was just one mystery. Every month Sitaram sent Rs. 900 to England as soon as he had drawn his pay. Mrs. Sitaram could never discover the reason for this regular remittance. She first thought that her husband remitted this money to a bank in England and was quite glad about it. Then she saw this could not be so. There is a lot of difference between voluntary saving and compulsory remittance which becomes quite obvious in the incidental behaviour and the moods accompanying the act.

One day Sitaram told his wife that he had got into debt when he was studying in England and he was making these monthly remittances to clear off those obligations. It was still not clear to her why when all his expenses had been regularly met by her father, he should have got into debt. But a wife cannot afford to express her doubts or ask too many questions. Whenever the topic came up he would quietly change the conversation and pass on to something else. Occasionally the wife would be oppressed by the thought of the many stories she had heard about life in England. But Sitaram's loving tenderness towards her would immediately dispel all such suspicions. "What have I got to worry about? Let it be anything in the world: I shall think that his pay is only Rs. 300." Thus the Sub-Collector's wife consoled herself; such is the beauty and power of the traditional devotion of Indian wives.

It was with money sent by his father-in-law that Sitaram went to England, stayed there three years and passed the I.C.S. examination. When he went to England, his wife Sundari

was nineteen. She was quite a pretty girl, but she wore old-fashioned ornaments and wrapped herself in the orthodox saree. The girl thought that was what would please the husband. She and her mother sincerely believed that every additional ornament bought and worn on the face added to its beauty. But poor Sitaram, on the contrary, constantly thought how much nicer his wife would look if she cast aside this clumsy jewel in her nose and those huge ear-rings and wore nothing but a simple pair of thin bangles, and, instead of the horrible old style hanging folds of the orthodox saree, just a light fabric neatly worn in the modern style. And as for the terribly ugly coloured silk bordered sleeves reaching down her elbows, anything would be better, he thought; indeed sleeves could be altogether abolished.

But he, too, was an old fashioned fellow at bottom. He was too shy to tell his wife what he felt on these subjects. "Even if I talk about them, these conservative folk would not listen to me," he said to himself and let his discontent rankle in his mind. He would go to the pictures and there he would see the beauties, both those shown on the screen and those that came to watch. "All these people know how to make the best of their looks. But my wife is so thoroughly stupid," he would say to himself and only sigh over his misfortune, "but let me go to England and return. Then I shall set everything right." So adjourning the matter, he found relief for the time being.

Sitaram reached England. Wherever he turned his eyes, it was refinement. Oh! what beauty of figure! What tasteful clothes! What a fine sense of proportion! And the beautiful behaviour and the bright faces! And the genial atmosphere! It was truly a paradise. What more can man want? So felt Sitaram.

After a few days in that paradise, among the angels, one particular angel came to move familiarly with him. "Ah! It were bliss merely to keep on talking to this divine creature." Nothing more was required, he felt, to make life supremely happy, neither marriage nor children. Such was the joy he derived in her mere company. The moment she left him he would be plunged in

melancholy. He would think of his wife Sundari whom he had left behind in the village, and began even to feel a dislike for her.

One day Sitaram's evil stars were at their climax of ill-luck. The female angel's net was spread out effectively and Sitaram was finally caught. He decided to marry her. The thing was settled and in three weeks it was all over. In England arrangements are available with which to complete a marriage in less than half an hour. In the atmosphere of irresponsible joy in his early conversations with the woman Sitaram had given her to understand that he was still a bachelor. That inexactitude was maintained. It is difficult to rectify such errors.

Things proceeded on that basis and the falsehood was finally repeated before the official registering the marriage. The declaration was an essential part of the ceremony, for in England no one can marry again when his wife is still alive. The law in that country makes no difference between man and woman in this respect. Sitaram and his angel did not at once live as husband and wife. There were difficulties that caused this to be put off for a while. He wrote home and gave reasons which necessitated increased remittances. Of course all the money came from his father-in-law. Then Sitaram and his British wife started living together.

He thought his angel's disposition rapidly showed marked deterioration. The equanimity and the refinement that he had so greatly admired before, appeared gradually to fade away and finally he thought there was nothing of it left. He found real harshness in her disposition till one day he even thought Sundari was certainly the better girl of the two.

Soon enough he discovered that the beautiful lips that he had admired owed all their beauty to the regular application of lipstick, and when not painted were really disappointing. Indeed he sometimes thought he had been misled about her age. Sitaram now thought of Sundari's mouth and Sundari's lips. Oh God! Were they not a thousand times more beautiful?

One day, it became clear that the hair on his English angel's head was not her own. Sitaram went through a hell of mental

agony that day, a pain that I cannot describe because only souls in hell could understand it. Finally, it became apparent that not only the hair on the head but the eyebrows too were mere black-paint. Another month passed and he found the pearl-white teeth of his new wife safely lying in two grinning rows in a receptacle kept for the purpose! Yes, he was slow to make these discoveries.

Sitaram could bear it no longer. He made up his mind that a rope should end his agony.

He leaned back on his chair and cursed himself. He then thought of his native village and of the temple there. Amidst such thoughts he closed his eyes for a time and was lost in reverie. All the days of his childhood came back to him in a flood of memory. His dead mother's figure stood before him, with eyes full of pity. Then followed a vision of his wife, innocent Sundari awaiting his return home, radiant-faced like the Goddess Uma doing penance. People on the eve of suicide go through such mental experiences and see such visions. Tears filled Sitaram's eyes.

Then suddenly into his mind came the dentures that he had seen in the box. The two rows of false teeth stood in front of him as if alive, mocking at him and saying, "Fool! You have been deceived!"

"What! Should I give up my life for this wretched thing? No, no, I am not going to ruin Sundari in my disappointment over this wretched creature. What a great and irretrievable act of folly was I going to commit!" he said to himself. He got up from the chair, dressed and went out.

After wandering about for a few days he met by chance his old professor from the Madras Christian College where he had been educated. To him he told the whole story of his folly and entreated the professor to help him out. The professor took pity on his old pupil and set about extricating him from the tangle. He got the woman to agree to a compromise. Sitaram bound himself to agree that when he successfully finished his examination

and was in the I.C.S. he would send her a big fraction of his salary, whatever it was, every month. The scale was fixed and he put his signature to it and thought he was lucky in getting out of the scrape on any terms. A false declaration before the marriage Registrar involved a substantial term of imprisonment, perpetual disgrace and no hope of any employment.

He worked hard over his books, got into his I.C.S. successfully and embarked for India. As soon as he stepped off the boat and put his foot on Indian soil, he felt like a child put back in his mother's lap; he was so happy. People who return to India from abroad all have this feeling, but Sitaram felt it in the most intense form on account of the incidents he had gone through. When he came home and saw Sundari, he just forgot convention and in front of the whole crowd clasped her to his bosom. Her orthodox dress and old-fashioned ornaments now looked truly beautiful. The sleeves reaching her elbows which he had abominated before, gave him now a sense of security and joy. What a man saved from drowning would feel about the solid earth on which he stood after being taken out of the water, Sitaram now felt about the old-fashioned things he saw in Sundari. Only then did he realize how beautiful Sundari was and how truly refined.

He paid a heavy price for his enlightenment, no doubt, but what price is too big for the love that now rose in his heart, like the sun that gives life to all things?

CRACKERS

"Father, I want some crackers," cried Veeran's boy. But where was poor Veeran to get them? In the Brahmin quarters and in the weavers' street, children began firing off crackers as much as three days before Dipavali. Veeran's boy stood watching the fun ten yards away. Whenever he bent down to pick up unburnt bits he was scolded and sent away.

Next day, it was worse. The sound of bursting crackers was heard everywhere and Veeran's son felt an irrepressible longing for them. "Why should there be crackers in every house but ours?" was the question he kept asking himself and to which he could find no answer. He was afraid to ask his father.

He felt no inclination to go back to the *cheri*, though he was hungry. He stood looking at the children enjoying their crackers in the Brahmin street.

"Stand at a distance," cried a man who was walking along in the street. Veeran's boy trembled and ran into a lane where he crept close to the wall.

Did Veeran's son know why he had to hide like this in fear? Who can read what passes through children's minds? There was a small puppy near him. He felt a kinship with the poor beast, stood stroking it till the Brahmin gentleman was gone, and then came out. After a long time he went back in the *cheri* where his father and other 'untouchables' lived.

"Father, won't you buy me some crackers?" he asked Veeran. His father gave him a smart slap on the cheek that knocked him down.

"Why do you come home drunk and beat the poor boy?" his mother cried. "Can't you even spare a penny from all you spend on drink to buy some crackers for him? Isn't he even allowed

to ask? Do you want to kill the boy for that?" She picked him up and soothed him.

"Mother, I want crackers," the boy again said.

"Shut up. What need has a pariah boy for crackers?" she said and went away to attend to the cooking.

"If you ask for crackers again, I'll kill you," threatened Veeran.

There was great bustle in Doraiswamy Iyengar's house. His son-in-law had arrived from Madras with trunk and bedding. Doraiswamy Iyengar's third daughter had recently been married to a young university graduate called Chellam Iyengar. The wedding had been celebrated with all the pomp that four thousand rupees could command. This was the first Dipavali since the wedding, and Chellam had brought lots of things, including twenty packets of crackers and coloured lights for his little brothers-in-law. He distributed them all and went to see his mother-in-law. Kittu and Cheenu, his seven and four-year-old brothers-in-law, divided the crackers between them. Cheenu wanted all the yellow packets and Kittu refused to give them to him. Kamala said, "Give baby the yellow packets." Kamala was the proud girl who had been married.

After settling their dispute, she said to the children, "You should not light them now. Dipavali is only tomorrow. Have your oil-rubbing and bath tomorrow and then you can light the crackers." She left them and went to her mother.

"I shall light mine now," said Kittu.

"I won't, I'll keep them for tomorrow," said Cheenu.

"I'll light one packet now and keep the rest for tomorrow," said Kittu.

They both took up their crackers and went to their mother.

"Mother! Keep them safe," said Cheenu and dropped his share into his mother's lap. In her joy at her son-in-law's arrival, she hugged Cheenu, and kissed him saying, "You are a good boy."

Then she put the packet of crackers in the cupboard where the silver vessels were usually kept and went to talk to Chellam Iyengar.

It was Dipavali day. "Alas, he has taken away everything! Silver vessels worth a thousand rupees have gone," wailed Sitamma.

"He's stolen my purse too, and I'd kept all the money I'd withdrawn from the bank in it," cried Doraiswamy Iyengar.

"We must go and tell the police," said Chellam.

"How much money did you have?" asked Sitamma's younger brother Aramudu.

"Mother, where are all the crackers?" said Cheenu.

"Ss-h-h. The thief has taken away all the crackers," whispered Kittu in his ear.

"What is a thief?" asked Cheenu.

"He is a black fellow who breaks into houses at night when we are all asleep and takes away everything," said Kittu.

"Did he come here yesterday?" asked Cheenu. Kittu nodded yes.

"Did he take away all the crackers?" said Cheenu and began to cry.

"Don't cry, baby. We will catch the thief and beat him," said Sitamma.

"The wretched thief has even taken away the children's crackers," said Kamala.

Doraiswamy Iyengar searched everywhere for his purse and was now sitting in a corner with his head in his hands.

"What is lost is lost and you cannot get it back. Come, do have your bath," said Sitamma turning to the son-in-law.

"No, we must go to Chavadiur and inform the police at once. Come uncle," said Chellam Iyengar and went away with uncle Krishna Iyengar.

"He has not left us a single silver vessel. How am I to entertain our son-in-law?" said Sitamma again.

Veeran's boy was burning crackers. The other children in the *cheri* were standing round, clapping hands and shouting in great glee.

Where did they get the crackers?.

No one knew. On the day of Dipavali Veeran brought four packets of squibs and gave them to his boy, saying, "Burn them." The boy jumped up and ran to his mother crying, "Crackers! Crackers!"

The day after Dipavali, two men came and took Veeran away. They did not return. Wife and child went to the teacher in the town. "Will you send a petition for us?" cried the woman.

Teacher Mahalingam Pillaį said, "They were policemen. There is a charge of house-breaking and theft against your husband."

"I am ruined," cried the woman and beat her head.

On information got in the toddy shop, the police went to the *cheri* in mufti, took Kuppan to the police station, and then returned to the *cheri*. to make enquiries. When they found pieces of crackers among the rubbish they asked how they came to be there and were told they had been burnt by Veeran's little son. They collected all the pieces and left.

They took Veeran to Chavadiur and questioned him in approved police style.

"Don't beat me. I will tell you everything," said Veeran.

Next day two men of Talaiyur belonging to registered criminal tribes, Venkatan and Chennarayan, were arrested and taken away. They searched the house of Kuppan the goldsmith, in the neighbouring village and interrogated him. Next day when the house of Kuppan's father-in-law was searched, five hundred rupees in currency notes and silver vessels were found.

Veeran's boy was standing in the witness box.

"Did your father give you crackers?"

"Yes, sir—No sir!" said the boy.

"Tell the truth. Don't be afraid," said the Inspector in a stern manner.

"I asked my father for crackers. He gave me a slap on the face and knocked me down. I did not light any crackers. I swear," said the boy.

"That is the truth, Sir. The other witness lied. They all lie" cried a woman from a corner of the court house.

"Arrest her," cried the police Inspector.

Two policemen at once went and took Veeran's wife—she was the woman who shouted—to the magistrate's table and made her stand there.

"Take care. Have you come here to tutor your boy when he is examined by the court?" said the magistrate threateningly and Veeran's wife began to tremble as if about to swoon.

"Take her out," ordered the magistrate and the Inspector both together.

The trial was then resumed. The boy spoke about the crackers in three different ways.

"Enough" said the magistrate.

Then the Inspector made a long speech to the court.

One week afterwards the magistrate released Veeran and the Talayur prisoners. The two goldsmiths were sentenced. "The two Talayur prisoners cannot be punished on the sole strength of the statement given by Veeran to the police," he said in his judgment.

There was not sufficient evidence against Veeran either. Though the presence of crackers in the *cheri* was highly suspicious yet, as there was no clear evidence to prove that the pieces of crackers found in the rubbish heap were the same as those stolen from Doraiswamy Iyengar's house, the magistrate acquitted Veeran of the charge and released him.

"Venkata, no one but that idiot would have taken those packets of crackers. That was certainly the cause of all this trouble," said Chennarayan.

"I told him so at the time. I told him to take some other thing, but he would not listen to me. While he was busy taking all the crackers and tying them up, someone in the house made a noise and we had to leave at once," said Venkatan.

"That's what comes of trying to do what is not the proper work of one's caste. We made a mistake in taking the fellow with us," said Chennarayan.

These men of the "thieving caste" did not know anything about the boy's weeping for those crackers or of Veeran's beating him.

Veeran returned to the ***cheri,*** In the jail he had been fed regularly. In his house there was no food. Veeran's wife took a mud pot and went to the farmers' quarters to beg for some stable gruel. Even hunger could not quell the joy she felt at her husband's return home.

Veeran's boy never again cried for crackers. If he saw anybody burning them he instinctively ran away.

JAGADISA SASTRI'S DREAM

Jagadisa Sastri of Rangoon returned to Tiruvudaimarudur, where he was born, in his fifty-second year. He first went to Rangoon as the cook of a barrister called Subbayyar. But he soon gave up cooking and took to conducting the religious ceremonies of the Brahmins who were settled there. As he was born in a family accustomed to priestly work, he could recite some *mantras*. He made up for what he did not know how to recite by reading from a printed book he kept for the purpose.

He lent out for interest the money he had earned as cook and *purohit* and soon became a rich man. It was rumoured that he had amassed a lakh of rupees in cash.

When he was in Rangoon, he often thought of marriage, but his wish had not borne fruit. Now as he was advanced in age, he gave up that idea. He made up his mind that he would buy a little land in Tiruvudaimarudur, adopt a son for safe passage to the next world, and spend the remaining days of his life in peace. On his return, however, an incident occurred during his stay in Kumbakonam for the great twelve-yearly bathing festival that fell during that year which altered the course of his life.

In the house in which he was lodged, there was a man named Nageshwarayyar, who with his three daughters had also come to Kumbakonam for the festival. Jagadisa Sastri learnt that Nageshwarayyar was a diamond merchant and agent of some insurance company. He belonged to the North Arcot district, but he had lived for a long time in Andhradesha and for a short period after that in Calcutta. His first two daughters were already married, but not the third. She was fourteen years old, good-looking and wonderfully proficient in playing the veena. Jagadisa Sastri was fifty-two, but he was still robust. Nageshwarayyar was of the opinion that no one looking at him could guess that he was on the wrong side of forty.

J.S. came to know that Nageshwarayyar had misappropriated the money he owed the insurance company and was at a loss to find any means of replacing it. It was therefore agreed between them that Jagadisa Sastri should pay six thousand rupees to enable Nageshwarayyar to pay off his debt and that the marriage should be quietly celebrated in Tirupati at once. The money was paid and the ceremony was over. Nageshwarayyar returned to Calcutta on urgent business, and Jagadisa Sastri was surprised that he heard nothing from him. But he thought little of it and left for Rangoon with his young wife.

II

Hardly two years had passed when Jagadisa Sastri's wife gave birth to a boy. Like other elderly men who beget an heir late in life, he brought him up very affectionately.

When another two or three years had passed, his wife's conduct became the subject of common scandal. The Sastri could not avoid hearing of it but he felt he was helpless in the matter. Then, one day on returning home he found his wife had left him, taking her fiddle, jewellery, and all the money in the cash-box, leaving the old man in anguish.

The boy was now seven years old and at school. By occupying himself with his boy's education and performing *purohit's* work for a few select friends the Sastri largely succeeded in forgetting his grief.

Ramachandran did well at school, went to the university and got his degree when he was nineteen. In 1930 the two came back to their native country.

J.S. had a cousin in Madras who was a successful lawyer. So successful, indeed, was Sitaramayyar that he was expected to become Advocate-General when that post fell vacant. What more natural than that J.S. should stay with his cousin on arrival or that Sitaramayyar's wife should wish to marry Ramachandran to her daughter Parvati? "Where can we find her a better husband? Already a B.A., we can send him to England to sit for the I.C.S.," she said, and Sitaramayyar was in full agreement. One thing,

however, stood in the way, namely, the Sarda Act. As the girl was only eleven years old, her marriage could not take place at once without breaking the law. And how can a man expecting to become Advocate-General, go against the law?

But Sitaramayyar's wife did not wish by postponement to take any risk of missing such a good son-in-law. She insisted that though the marriage could not be performed now, it should be agreed to in writing signed by both families. This was done and, according to the document, Sitaramayyar should bear the cost of sending the boy to England for the I.C.S., and the marriage should take place on his return after three years. As the girl was dark-skinned Ramachandran was by no means enamoured of the matter; but out of respect for his father's wishes, and in his eagerness to go to England, he made no objections.

III

When Ramachandran left for England, Jagadisa Sastri returned to Rangoon. But alone there without his son, his mind was seldom at peace. Memories of the wife who had left him often returned to trouble him. This sickness of mind reacted on his health which now began to fail. He consulted his doctor thinking there was something wrong with his body. The doctor assured him that there was nothing wrong with him but advised him to go back to his own country. As this appeared good advice, Sastri finally left Rangoon for India.

In the steamer something quite unexpected happened. He saw a lady travelling second class who resembled his lost wife. Of course, there was some difference, but it was more than fifteen years since she had left him. Before the steamer reached Madras he was more than three-quarters sure that it was really his wife. When they reached port and the lady was getting down with her things he went and stood in front of her. They looked at each other for a moment. "I am staying at 614, Angappa Naicken Street. You can see me there, if you wish to speak to me," said the lady. Sastri laughed and said, "Oh! It is you, after all. I was right."

"Yes, It is I," she also said and laughed back.

IV

Sastri spent two days in his Sambandhi Sitaramayyar's house, where he was entertained in high style. There was talk of throwing open temples to the untouchables everywhere in the South. "Sanatana Dharma is ruined," cried all the people in Sitaramayyar's house. Sastri thought so too.

"Why were you silent when the Sarada Bill was proposed? This is the result," said Sitaramayyar's wife.

"Don't talk nonsense! What is the connection between that and this?" asked Sitaramayyar.

"No, no! What she says is very true," said Sastri. Another lawyer, an apprentice under Sitaramayyar, gently said, "Did you not cross the sea for Rangoon? That also paves the way to temple entry."

"What is all this irrelevant talk? Is going to Rangoon for a living the same thing as letting untouchables into our holy temples?" asked Jagadisa Sastri impatiently.

"The Shastras speak of only four castes. There is no fifth caste. What harm is there in considering them as belonging to the fourth caste?" asked the junior lawyer.

Jagdisha Shastri said, "You people read translations of our scriptures and talk like profound scholars. The four castes were God's original creation. But afterwards new impure castes were created by intercaste unions. The *chandalas* were the issue of these irregular marriages."

The junior lawyer said, "Brahma seems to have failed in his purpose. Do you mean to say that people of these so-called non-touchable castes are all the descendants of erring Brahmin women?"

Sastri said, "There is no sense in going too deep into these matters. We have treated them as *chandalas* for several generations. We cannot ask for proofs of identification now. Where is the proof that we are Brahmins?"

At it was then time to go to court, the gathering dispersed, and Jagadisa Sastri set out for No. 614, Angappa Naickan Street.

V

That evening Jagadisa Sastri was to be seen at the Central Station asking for a ticket to Benares. He looked ten years older now than he had done in the morning!

"Which route do you want to go by, grand-father?" asked the booking clerk.

"I don't mind which route. Let it be the shortest one. I must bathe in the Ganges as soon as possible and get rid of my sins," said Sastri.

This supreme apathy or *vairagya* of Jagadisa Sastri was the result of things he had learnt from his wife in No. 614, Angappa Naicken Street. For Jagadisa Sastri's father-in-law was neither a Brahmin nor a diamond merchant. His real name was Pariarinaicken. Assistant Accountant-General Tyagarajayyar had taken him to Calcutta along with him, where he kept a shaving saloon. While engaged in this his hereditary caste-occupation, he kept a destitute widow as his mistress, and Jagadisa Sastri's wife was their daughter. After his daughter's marriage, he was mixed up in some criminal conspiracy, sentenced to seven years' imprisonment, and was still a prisoner in Lahore jail.

Jagadisa Sastri's wife, after leaving him in Rangoon, had wandered about, and at last joined a film studio where she earned a lot of money. She said she was not in need, was quite happy and that she did not desire any help from him now.

"I and my father conspired to cheat you; God alone must forgive us," she said.

In spite of this, Jagadisa Sastri could not helping admiring and even feeling a greater affection than ever before for his wife. He wept like a child. "Who ever invented this caste system? God could not have done it. Let's bury the past and return to Rangoon and live happily?" he asked.

"It's no good suggesting that. I'm not fit to touch you. My sin will not be washed away until seven generations have gone. Go to the Ganges and rid yourself of the sin of marrying me," said Sastri's wife. When he came out of the house, Sastri was seized with terror. He thought of his son who was studying in England, and who would return in a few months. He had to be married. If it became known that he was the son of this wicked woman! What was her caste? What was the boy's caste? What would Sitaramayyar and his wife say? Sastri's head reeled. He tottered and with difficulty reached the station.

On the second night of his train-journey, Sastri's fellow passengers took pity on the feeble old man and made room for him to stretch himself. He was tired out and soon fell into deep slumber. He had a fearful dream in his sleep.

Ramachandran had returned from England. He did not look like a handsome Brahmin boy now. Like the cursed Trisanku he came home disfigured, a regular pariah boy. He was no I.C.S. but only a cooly. But Shastri—that is the peculiarity of dreams—loved him more than ever before.

He dreamt that Sitaramayyar and his wife drove him out of their house. The gardener, the driver and the scavenger were all scolding him and chasing him. A mob collected in the street from which Sastri ad his son somehow escaped.

He was now in his own village but everybody got to know that he was sheltering a *pariah* boy in his house. They came in large numbers and chased him and his son out of the Brahmin street.

Sastri now found himself in Madras again with his son. They got into a bus. The conductor came and asked, "What caste is this boy?" An old man with a string of beads round his neck cried, "Oh! this boy is a *chandala,* an untouchable." "Throw him out," cried everybody in the bus. The bus-owner dragged him out and they jumped down together. Unable to bear the shame, they went into a lane and hid themselves.

There was another change of scene. They were in Sita-

ramayyar's office in Mylapore. "Can't you keep my son as a clerk in your office?" begged Sastri of Sitaramayyar.

"How is that possible?" said Sitaramayyar. "My wife will object, and she walked in at that moment; Jagadisa Sastri trembled with fear.

"Is an untouchable to sit and work in our office? A pretty idea! We don't want him. Pay up our money at once," she said and showed a bond. It was the very paper on which was indentured the agreement about Ramachandran's marriage. Sitaramayyar had spent Rs. 15,000 for Ramachandran. They asked Sastri to pay them back.

Another change. The head of a ***mutt*** was seen clothed in yellow and holding a trident, seated on a deer skin. Sastri asked, "Swamiji, can you change my son into a Brahmin?" The Swami said in a sonorous tone, "Impossible! There is no hope of purification for a born *chandala*. His caste can be destroyed only when his body is burnt to ashes. If he follows the duties enjoined on his caste faithfully, he will be born in a higher caste in his next birth. But he will have to be reborn several times before he can become a Brahmin."

Jagadisa Sastri yelled, "Villain! Are you a *sanyasi*? Have you forgotten the breach-of-trust case in which you were convicted? Did you not send false petitions? Did you not sell things taken on hire? Did you not escape with a fine when imprisonment was well deserved. Is there no sin in all that?"

The Swami's eyes turned red with anger. "You outcaste! I curse you! You have spoken ill of me and reminded a *sanyasi* of a former period of his life," he cried, and came forward to beat him with his stick. Sastri ran and hit his head against the street door.

As the old gentleman rolled down from the railway seat he awoke from slumber and his dream.

VI

Next night, Sastri had more dreams about his son. He no sooner closed his eyes than they began.

He was wandering about again with his son. They both felt hungry and entered a coffee-hotel. The server put rice-cakes on two leaves in front of them. When they were about to eat, someone sitting near asked, "Who is that boy?" Sastri was afraid and did not reply. A voice answered, "He is a *chandala*." Then everyone shouted at once, "He is a *pariah*, he is an untouchable; turn him out." The server snatched the rice-cakes from the boy and threw them into the refuse-trough, and pushed the boy out. Sastri ran out after him crying, "My son, my son."

Rao Bahadur Narasimhachariar of Kumbakonam was a member of the Delhi Assembly. "When you go to Delhi, please take my boy as your clerk. He has passed his B.A., but on account of my sin he has suddenly become an untouchable," Sastri said to him.

"No Sastri! It is true that at Delhi we do not observe caste differences much. But how can we keep an untouchable in our house? It wouldn't matter if he were a Sudra," said Narasimhachariar. "Then, can you convert him into a Sudra." asked Sastri eagerly.

"How can I become a Sudra?" the boy said. "I am of an impure caste. You yourself said so."

"Alas, it is true. Will no one burn the Shastras to ashes?" cried Sastri.

Ramachandra said, "It's all right, father! I'll be a railway porter. No one will worry about that."

"We can but try that," said Sastri in desperation. Ramachandran at once turned into a railway-porter. For the first lot of luggage he carried he got four annas. But next day when he was about to lift up someone's trunk and bedding on to his head another boy ran up and shouted, "Sir, sir! This is a *pariah* boy!"

The owner of the trunk and bedding was a Brahmin official. "You fellow!" he cried, "How dare you touch my luggage?" and poked the boy in the back with the point of his umbrella. Rama-

chandran threw down the trunk and bedding and bolted like a criminal.

With his accursed son accompanying him, Sastri set out again. From somewhere in the sky the sound *"Chandala, chandala"* kept floating down. When the leaves in the trees rustled they seemed to sing the same burden *"Chandala, chandala."* The old man was quite exhausted; his legs ached, his throat was parched with thirst. He could see no tank or well anywhere near.

"I'm very thirsty, son. Bring me a little water," said Sastri.

"Father, who will give me water when I ask?" said Ramachandran.

"It is true, my boy. No one will give us water or let us help ourselves with it anywhere. We have to die."

"Why should we die? Father, get up, and we'll go to England. There is no caste or untouchability there."

"How can we go to England. We are still only at Vriddachalam," said Sastri.

"Look! There is a well with steps. Let's go down there and drink." And the boy led his father towards it. They descended the steps, trembling with fear. No one was there. They both drank till their thirst was quenched. When they were climbing up again they met an old woman. On seeing them she shouted, "Help! Help! Some *pariah* has come and defiled our village well. The wretch!"

At once a crowd collected. They were furious and pounched on the boy. Sastri took his son by the hand and ran away towards a distant temple. "Oh God!" he cried. "You alone must save us!" But when he came near the temple, a doubt arose which held him back.

"God! Everybody says my boy is a *chandala*. May we at least enter your temple? Who else but you can give us succour?" he wailed.

"You may enter without fear. I am mother and father to everyone. I know of no distinctions," a voice seemed to say from inside, and Sastri and his son entered. "At last we have found refuge and a place of safety," he said.

But a priest came running, crying, "Oh God! A *chandala* has entered the House of God." Several more arrived and soon a big mob surrounded father and son.

"The audacity of this *pariah* boy! Beat him! Kick him!" they shouted.

"He is not a *chandala,* He is my son," cried Shastri.

Just then, Sastri's wife arrived there somehow. "That is a lie. Don't believe the old man! He is my son. He is of a mixed origin and a *chandala,"* she screamed.

"Wretch! Ingrate! "Outcast!" said Sastri in a low voice. Then he faced the big crowd and cried, "God spoke through His voice, giving us permission to enter. Did you not hear?"

"Nothing of the sort! Thrash him! Kill him!" they shouted and fell upon Ramachandran.

"Oh God!" cried Sastri and sat up. He found the ticket collector gently patting him to wake him up. "Wake up, grandfather! What are you crying for? Ticket please."

It was a dream after all! But Sastri sat shivering for a long while. It seemed even when he was awake that the train was saying *"pariah, pariah"* with the noise it made as it sped on its rails.

Some time later Ramachandran returned from England and was appointed Assistant Collector of Kurnool. The facts of his parentage were told neither to Ramachandran nor to Sitaramayyar.

Everybody missed the old man, and for some time he was often remembered affectionately. Some said he had a sudden call of renunciation and had gone to Benares to become a *sanyasi.* A few said he had drowned himself in the Ganges.

They waited some time, but when he did not come back the marriage between Sitaramayyar's daughter and Assistant Collector Mr J. R. Chandra took place as had been agreed to in the indenture. It was celebrated with all pomp and ceremony, like other marriages in Mylapore.